



Rimisp – Latin American Center for Rural Development: An institutional evaluation

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Executive Summary

This document offers an evaluative study of the work of Rimisp, formerly the "International Farming Systems Research and Methodology Network," now the "Latin American Center for Rural Development." The evaluation was conducted at Rimisp's own request and with Rimisp resources, to be used as input into the organization's strategic thinking regarding the next several years of the organisation's work. The purpose of the evaluation was to address questions of relevance, effectiveness, quality, efficiency, outcomes and sustainability. Rimisp's overall niche as well as its actual and potential contributions in Latin America were also addressed in the evaluation.

The study was carried out on a periodic basis from January through to July 2006. The main research method used were in-depth, open ended interviews, combined with e-mail interviews, a short closed question electronic survey and document review. Interviews were conducted in Chile, Argentina, Peru, El Salvador and Costa Rica, as well as by telephone, with a total of sixty-nine people; sixteen open-ended questionnaires were sent to deliberately targeted interviewees, with twelve replies received. Closed questionnaires were sent to a random sample of thirty-one *socios*¹ – eleven replies were received.

History and evolution of Rimisp

Rimisp began in 1986 as a network of IDRC-supported farming systems projects throughout Latin America. Rimisp subsequently became a legally constituted organization and when IDRC funding ended, the balance between its existence as a network and as a self-governing organization began to shift. Since then, Rimisp has functioned progressively less as a network and more as an independent organization without, however, ever losing its commitment to networking as a way of working, building capacities and recruiting core partners and allies. In this sense, after 20 years of existence Rimisp is still marked by its origins.

Since 1994, when initial IDRC funding abruptly ended, Rimisp steadily diversified its sources of financial support. After a temporary reduction in size, diversification has been accompanied by steady (and since 2002, more rapid) growth. Principal financial partners now include IDRC (the relationship began again in 1997), IFAD, ICCO, Ford Foundation, New Zealand Aid, DfID and various bodies within the Chilean Government. Since 2001/2, the number of principal investigators has increased from three to seven, large projects from four to eight, and the value of active projects from approximately US\$3.5 million to approximately US\$6 million, though this amount varies from year to year.

This period of growth has also seen a change in the emphasis of Rimisp's work. The early emphasis on methodology (farming systems research methods, in particular) has declined

¹ The report uses the Spanish term *socios* to refer to those organizations and individuals that Rimisp works with more closely. The term captures the sense of "associates" (some of whom may be partners) but is preferable to the term "partner" as not all these relationships are helpfully understood as partnerships.

significantly, and been replaced with a growing emphasis on building learning capacity in rural development and coordinating and conducting applied research on different dimensions of rural development. Rimisp now characterizes its institutional goal and strategies as follows: "to promote organizational learning and innovation in public and private projects, programs and policies in order to promote inclusion, equity, well being and democratic development and Latin American rural societies."

Given this evolution, Rimisp appears to be an organization that first aimed to support learning processes, and then over time has combined learning support with research support and a limited amount of in-house research. The breadth of activities has lead observers to view Rimisp in quite different ways – some see it as a development NGO, some as an organization that funds development, and others see it as a research centre and "think-tank". Rimisp is a hybrid institution. This also reflects funder preferences and aversions. Donor's appreciate Rimisp's ability to bring in resources that are then channeled to other organizations that actually carry out the research. Rimisp then advises and coordinates the other organization. Rimisp's role is regarded as by donors as an asset, which makes Rimisp attractive as a vehicle for channeling significant resources for research capacity building. Conversely, donors' relative aversion to supporting research (at least without a strong capacity building element) also limits the research that Rimisp can do directly. That said, Rimisp has done better than many centres in terms of generating resources for research.

While its rapid growth could have upset the coherence of Rimisp's portfolio of activities, in practice the projects are held together by three overlapping, broad, generative concepts (each with a positive and a normative dimension). These are: learning network (the longest standing of the three) territorially based rural development, and pro-poor market deepening. These three concepts have emerged over time and reflect both Rimisp's cumulative learning and the arrival of new staff.

- *Learning networks* are what Rimisp aims to build – the concept describes what the projects foster. Rimisp values learning networks in the context of understanding rural development partly as an extension and deepening of communities of learning throughout Latin America.
- The concept of *territorially based rural development* is codified in the enormously successful document on Territorially Based Rural Development, or DTR (Schejtman and Berdegúe, 2003), and a large part of Rimisp's portfolio has become terrain for testing, elaborating and disseminating this view of rural development.
- *Market deepening* reflects Rimisp's belief that poverty tends to be a result of insufficient rather than too much market development. Also central is Rimisp's commitment to new markets that need to be governed so that they are inclusive and accessible to the poor. Rimisp's sensitivity to market-derived processes of change in Latin America has led it to pick up on certain transformations and trends (non-agricultural employment, the supermarketization of food chains) either earlier or, in the eyes of many observers, in more interesting ways than other analysts.

With these core concepts, Rimisp's overall work program draws on *analytical* traditions originating both within social democracy and neoliberalism. As such, Rimisp is located within

the family of projects that are broadly considered "Third Way" and post-Washington Consensus, that seek poverty reduction within broader "renewal of social democracy" for rural development in Latin America.

While these three generative concepts underlie Rimisp's work, internal organisation continues to be more project-based as opposed to being by learning areas or programs. The current structure is not yet positioned to capitalize on activities as a basis for producing knowledge in ways that synthesize and analyze across projects and across scales of engagement in Latin America.

Rimisp's products: quality, relevance and impact

It is possible to distinguish two levels of products in Rimisp. Firstly, those produced within, and in large measure by, Rimisp's projects; and secondly, the products of Rimisp as an institution. The study focused on six project areas.

Project products

The quality and relevance of Rimisp's two longest standing projects – *Fidamerica* and the *Grupo Chorlavi* – is almost immediately apparent from the number of times these projects have been renewed. *Fidamerica* is now beginning its fourth phase, and *Chorlavi* is in its third phase. In each case, the projects have produced instruments and provided support to help networks of rural development organizations engage in learning activities. In each instance learning has clearly occurred among these organizations, as well as within the funding agency. Indeed, each funding agency has upheld these projects as models of how learning networks ought to be organized and to function. In each case, the learning seems to have been most relevant for, and to have mostly occurred among, technical project staff and organizations, though a wider community also participates in and benefits from the electronic conferences and project publications. In neither instance is there much evidence that the learning occurring within the networks has moved to a higher scale in terms of influencing policy. Nor has this learning occurred to any significant extent among rural people's organizations and movements.

Regoverning Markets and *Territorios rurales en movimiento (TREM)* are the most research oriented of Rimisp's large projects. *Regoverning markets* constitutes an area of work on rural economies and market restructuring that includes non-farm rural employment, the effects of supermarket supply chains for rural production options, and now more generally the implications of recent changes in a range of commodity markets to enable small scale producers to access markets. The scope of current work – which is global in reach and scale and is conducted through an international consortium – largely reflects the success of earlier work. Rimisp's research on supermarkets and non-farm employment are widely recognized - above all in the international, donor and research communities – as having been formative contributions that anticipated (in the supermarkets case above all) emerging themes and so helped establish research agendas. The international quality of the work is reflected in its funding sources, the reach of its partnerships, and publications in peer-reviewed, international journals. *TREM* brought Rimisp and IDRC into unfamiliar research terrain – the role of social movements in fashioning institutions of governance and patterns of rural development. It has been a more complicated project and has suffered from: the two main partners' relative unfamiliarity with the theme; the

workload of the initial coordinator; and the series of changes that have occurred over the course of the project.

The final two areas of work – a project to elaborate a proposal for a rural development strategy for Argentina, and the a number of evaluation and systematization contracts for different departments of the Chilean government – are cases in which Rimisp has sought to take the concept of Territorially Based Rural Development (DTR) and make it relevant, indeed central, to government thinking on rural policy. Each has, like TREM, delivered some highly valued products and some products with limitations. The two areas of work demonstrate Rimisp's ability to work directly with national and regional governments in Latin America and to deliver products that are useful to these partners and clients. In each instance, however, there have been moments at which the pressure of work within Rimisp, its physical distance from some of the debates and conflicts surrounding the theme on which Rimisp was working, as well as in-country dynamics over which it had no control, have compromised product quality. Also there has been a tendency – at certain moments – for work to be over influenced by the concept of DTR leading to documents that appear to be more deductive (from concept to policy) than inductive (from regional dynamics to policy).

Institutional products

First, Rimisp has produced a set of methodological products – in particular for the systematization and evaluation of rural policy instruments – that have given it an important competitive edge for consultancy, particularly within Chile. These products have both grown out of, and have fed back into Rimisp's projects, and reflect an important institutional contribution to the rural development community in Latin America.

Second, Rimisp has – through lessons accumulated within its projects – developed systems for the management of complex, multi-actor, international projects. These systems – which combine networked learning, electronic and real time conferences, open competitive (or closed-system competitive) funds and learning exchanges – are very highly valued by Rimisp's donors, but also by its partners who have found them to be vehicles for connecting with other organizations in the region.

Third, Rimisp has delivered a series of intellectual products that go beyond its projects. In some cases these products take the form of turning project outputs into more internationally available journal articles; in others, they are stand alone publications that are circulated electronically in order to influence policy debate. The products derive from Rimisp's privileged position – made possible by its products – to synthesize lessons. Some of these products have been very highly valued (most recently and importantly the document on DTR), while others have been deemed useful but not cutting edge.

The Rimisp model

Rimisp's mode of operation is central to how it sustains the quality and impact of its work, as well as to its own sustainability as an organization. Five dimensions of this mode of operation are identified.

First, Rimisp is a *social capital dense* institution. That is, it invests heavily in relationships. While these relationships make claims on Rimisp, in net terms they deliver a collective subsidy to the work of Rimisp that at the same time greatly increases both its reach and the quality of work. Rimisp invests in these relations in several ways. Communication, interaction and travel are taken very seriously and conducted collegially. Partners are involved in project development and framing. Also, Rimisp channels approximately 69 percent of its total work and administrative budget to others. This generates respect and legitimacy for Rimisp, and creates incentives for others to work with them.

Second, and closely related, Rimisp is a *mix between an organization and a network* and to some degree keeps the boundary between the two porous and blurred. Thus, almost all of Rimisp's work is done through networks of some sort. Rimisp enrolls partners with whom it wants to collaborate within its network and thus also enrolls their networks and gains legitimacy. At the same time, core Rimisp staff often take something of a back seat and so when Rimisp acts the public face of this action is often another organization or researcher. However, in other spheres, and above all in terms of its relationship with funding agencies, Rimisp acts directly. It has been successful in turning funding relationships into ones of deep respect, and mutual benefit. These deepened relationships have in turn proven to be channels not only for subsequent funding but more importantly for policy influence. Rimisp exercises policy influence primarily through shorter, more direct contacts with policy makers and framers more than it does through its contacts with third parties who themselves influence policy.

Third Rimisp has consciously (and unconsciously) molded a particular organizational culture. Repeatedly observers refer to Rimisp as professional, transparent and honest. Furthermore, these qualities are consciously managed and developed within Rimisp. This has created a culture that is an asset and Rimisp is considered to be a model for NGO "good governance" that is valued most highly by funding agencies. Other dimensions of organizational culture have not been consciously produced. First of all, some consider Rimisp to have been influenced by the Chilean experience of rural development and feel that this reduces the relevance of some of their work in other parts of the region. Others note a gender imbalance within Rimisp's work team, and a dominant culture that focuses on interactions amongst men. In addition to any inherent inequalities that this may imply, it also reflects a wider cultural dimension embodied in the research foci of the principal researchers. Research foci have not dealt significantly with questions of difference, power and conflict and hence Rimisp has a research culture in which these themes surface far less than others. Internally there is also a sense of significant distance between the research and administrative staff.

Fourth, Rimisp's administrative and financial model consciously minimizes costs and maximizes revenue, necessary because Rimisp has neither institutional nor endowment funding. Administration is very lean, and staff work exceptionally hard to maximize revenue, principal investigators (PIs) generating between three and ten times their salary and overhead costs. This is necessary to support both Rimisp and the large turnover within the organization, and to supplement salaries. However, it also leads to work overloads and in 2005 led to several instances in which the quality of projects and the stability of Rimisp's brand came into question when PIs were unable to give projects the time they required.

Conclusions

Rimisp is a respected, trusted and extremely competent organization with which a wide range of actors *want* to cooperate, that funding agencies consider a model partner, and that many within the community of international agricultural and rural development deem to be a leading player. This legitimacy comes not from being a "civil society" organization – instead it comes from performance. Repeatedly in interviews for this study, Rimisp was lauded for its transparency, honesty, professionalism, efficiency and unaligned independence.

While Rimisp has many links with Latin American rural society, it is not embedded in a particular segment of society. This gives it independence and balance, though also a certain detachment, particularly from local (grassroots) organizations and social movements that some other partners feel slightly less comfortable about. Independence does not mean Rimisp does not stand for anything, however, and its broad role is within that set of actors in Latin America concerned with modernizing social democratic approaches (in Rimisp's case, approaches towards rural development) and to inject more sensitivity as to the place of market deepening and broadening in any project concerned with social inclusion.

In playing this role Rimisp moves between more localized rural development actors, governments and international organizations, allowing interplay between the ideas of these different actors. This defines a second important role and specific contribution for Rimisp: to help deepen conversations such as these, conversations that might otherwise not happen. And third, Rimisp lobbied the agenda that it and its partners are working on to influence policy debates and statements, primarily through the so-called "short route" to policy influence.

In playing these roles, some compare Rimisp to think-tanks in North America and Europe, yet Rimisp is not yet a think-tank for four reasons: far more of Rimisp's project and staff portfolio is oriented to helping others to think, rather than doing the thinking internally; Rimisp has no institutional resources to give it the space necessary to think, and funding partners have not helped in this regard; third, Rimisp has no established mechanism (apart from a website) to communicate its thinking; and, Rimisp's staff composition is not that of a think-tank. The think-tank comparison is also inappropriate because Rimisp is not a self-contained organization, but rather benefits from the blurry boundary between Rimisp as the core organization and Rimisp understood as a bundle of networks through which a broader collective Rimisp operates. Anchoring and contributing to this collective has been another role of Rimisp the organization.

A final role has been to give like-minded funding agencies an instrument through which to act regionally in Latin America. In this respect, Rimisp has no clear competitor in the region. At the same time it has deepened these relationships, gained the trust of funding agencies and in the process contributed to their thinking (more in some cases than others, of course). Yet funding agencies have not reciprocated by investing in Rimisp as an institution. The tendency has been to use Rimisp as a vehicle for project implementation and a source of ideas, without supporting Rimisp's core capacities in developing ideas. In some ways funding agencies are free riding on Rimisp.

Recommendations

Rather than seek to become a think-tank, Rimisp should retain its current spread (from research capacity building through to research), as this spread of activities and partners is one of its greatest assets. This spread allows Rimisp to link between research and practice, to work with both local civil society actors and international financial institutions, to support capacity building as well as generate knowledge. Think-tank models could easily draw Rimisp away from these strengths. However, Rimisp should increase its research capacities over the coming years. This would allow it to make more sustained contributions to rural development debates, to make clearer which particular debates it wants most to contribute to, and to broaden its international visibility.

Growing this research arm could be done through the following means: recruiting a small number of new PIs to work on distinct but complementary themes; making the programmatic base of its work clearer, and in this way organizing itself around the debates to which it wants to contribute rather than around projects; enhancing its communication strategy; and experimenting with ways of bringing in more visiting researchers; and finding the resources required for its own staff to write more. Such growth will require resources, and this is an area that Rimisp ought to discuss with its funding partners.

In this growth process, Rimisp should also engage with new themes. This is important in order to protect the image of independence so that Rimisp is not seen as being overly committed to the idea of market deepening. Otherwise, the result could be less than felicitous interpretations of the nature of Rimisp and its commitments. Indeed, engagement with new themes would locate Rimisp more clearly within the wider project for Latin America of which it already considers itself to be a part. Without overly specifying potential new themes, as a whole they should open up Rimisp's own reflections on power, conflict and difference within rural development. In this sense, the recent steps towards engaging the theme of social movements as a topic should be sustained (despite current temptation to step back from the topic, this would be unfortunate); the gendered nature of rural development is another area that Rimisp would do well to engage in more fully.

Rimisp already has a wide range of partners, and sustaining these partnerships has a cost. Hence broadening partnerships should be approached with caution. However, in opening up new areas of work such as these, Rimisp would necessarily open new conversations – with partners who have more expertise in (and real world operation within) the themes of: power, difference, gender and social movement. This would be a sensible and important contribution to Rimisp.

In wanting to be a regional organization, Rimisp will also have to rethink the ways in which it organizes itself and its work geographically. In particular it needs to strengthen its presence in Central America, in order to learn from and contribute to debates there. This would be best achieved through some form of strategic partnership. Rimisp ought also to open up its work in Chile, though as an object of research rather than evaluation and by focusing on territorial dynamics.

Finally, Rimisp continues to be closely identified with Julio Berdegué. In this one sense Rimisp has *not* yet escaped the phenomenon apparent in many other NGOs – that of institutionalizing itself beyond the leadership of its founding Director, and of building an institutional identity that is independent of the founding leader's identity. While a reduction of the President's protagonism may occur by default (as other demands on his time increase), it is best not to leave this simply to fate, and instead begin to plan for and to broaden the public faces of Rimisp.

Introduction

This document offers an evaluative study of the work of Rimisp, one time "International Farming Systems Research and Methodology Network," now "Latin American Center for Rural Development."² As an evaluation, it addresses many of the relatively standard questions that evaluations ask – questions about impact, quality, systems and sustainability. However, underlying the evaluation are two more encompassing, existential questions: what is/are Rimisp's role(s) in Latin America?; and indeed, what *is* Rimisp? These questions are derived primarily from the terms of reference and the context that gave rise to this study,³ a context in which Rimisp's own principal investigators (PIs) are at a point where they wish to reflect on the actual, and potential, nature of Rimisp as an organization. These questions are also being asked because they are of interest for external observers and associates of Rimisp, who – when pushed a little – demonstrate some uncertainty as to what Rimisp is. Of course, identity is a recurrent issue for "non-governments"⁴ and is not necessarily a serious problem – identity may matter far less than product. As we shall see, on this criterion Rimisp performs very well. Yet organizations must make decisions as to where to dedicate their efforts (choosing to produce certain products and not others). In this case identity does matter and is expressed in terms of the criteria that would lead you to do A and not B, or to organize yourself in one way rather than another. At the moment of planning for the future, such criteria become important.

With this in mind, the remainder of this introduction offers a short conceptual section to frame a discussion as to the nature of Rimisp as well as its role and specific contributions to the region. The first substantive section of the document then reviews Rimisp's history, current activities and structure. The following section discusses what it is that Rimisp *produces*, the quality of these products, and their impacts. On that basis, the report then asks whether it is possible to talk of a Rimisp *brand*, and discusses the nature and stability of this brand. As this discussion will reveal, one of the things that Rimisp *produces* is an *institutional model* (or collection of sub-models) of how to be an NGO concerned with knowledge generation for rural development and poverty reduction. The third section of the document explores Rimisp internally, asking more specific questions about its organizational culture, financial model, and mode of administration, and the relationships therein. The advantages and limitations of this model are discussed, and this in turn serves as a basis for considering the relative sustainability of Rimisp, in both financial and human terms. The evaluation suggests that to the extent that there are threats to Rimisp's sustainability, they are predominantly internal rather than external. The final section discusses relevance: the overall relevance of Rimisp; the particular ways in which Rimisp is relevant; and the social

² The evaluation was requested and financed by Rimisp, not as a response to any particular institutional problems but rather as input into a process of strategic planning for the period 2007-2010.

³ The summary question in the Terms of Reference was: "En síntesis, ¿Cuál es el nicho y el aporte específico o el valor agregado de Rimisp en el contexto de las organizaciones públicas y privadas, nacionales e internacionales, que en América Latina se dedican a temas de desarrollo rural? ¿Cuáles son los cambios que debe realizar Rimisp para asegurar que en los próximos años pueda hacer una contribución significativa y aportar valor a los procesos de promoción de la inclusión, la equidad, el bienestar y el desarrollo democrático en las sociedades rurales latinoamericanas?"

⁴ The term was coined by Julie Fisher's (1998).

groups for which Rimisp is relevant. This discussion serves as a basis for the presentation of several distinct options open to Rimisp as it prepares for the next ten years.

The study was undertaken between January and June 2006, on an intermittent basis. While the units of analysis were Rimisp as an institution and the relationships between Rimisp and its environment (its primary partners – *socios*⁵, in particular), in practice the study used a selection of Rimisp's projects as a principal entry point. These projects are discussed in more detail towards the end of Section 1. Although Rimisp has a large portfolio of projects (in 2005 it had forty-three active projects, and in 2004, fifty-one), the bulk of its financing and of PI activities, are concentrated in a small number of large projects. The study focused on these larger projects.⁶ It also considered some of Rimisp's work within Chile, in order to better understand its role in the country within which it is legally registered, and to consider the relationship between regional and national roles.

Methodologically, the primary instrument was in-depth interviews with: members of Rimisp, a selection of core *socios*, officials from Rimisp's main funding agencies, and other observers. The interviews were conducted in Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, El Salvador and Peru. In addition, several telephone interviews were conducted. A second instrument used was a short questionnaire that was sent by email to a selection of *socios*. Sixteen open-ended questionnaires were sent to targeted interviewees and twelve replies were received. Another more closed questionnaire was sent to a random sample of thirty-one *socios* – eleven replies were received. In each case, non-respondents received one or two follow up notes. In a few cases, respondents explicitly stated that they preferred not to participate. A list of interviewees and questionnaire respondents is presented in Annex 1. A selection of project-based and other literature was also consulted. It is important to explicitly note that the author is involved in two separate Rimisp projects. He has been a member of the Council of the Grupo Chorlaví since 2001, and between 2005 and 2006 was a lead researcher on one of the grants awarded within the program Territorios Rurales en Movimiento. The author's experiences have served as points of reference (and insight) for this document, though may also lead to the conclusion that the study is not entirely external.⁷ The study benefited enormously from the assistance of Ximena Sanclemente, Research Assistant at Rimisp as well as from Rimisp staff generally. To my knowledge no information was ever withheld,⁸ and the process was conducted with complete transparency.

⁵ The report uses the Spanish term *socios* to refer to those organizations and individuals that Rimisp works with more closely. The term captures the sense of "associates" (some of whom may be partners) but is preferable to the term "partner" as not all these relationships are helpfully understood as partnerships.

⁶ In particular, the Strategy for Rural Development in Argentina, FIDAMERICA, Chorlaví, Regoverning Markets, and Territorios Rurales en Movimiento. It did not consider in detail two other principal projects that were still in their early stages in January 2006 - these were the project on livelihoods and indigenous municipalities, and that on *Territorios con Identidad cultural*.

⁷ The study was conducted when the author was PI on a Ford Foundation supported project with a group of research based non-governmental organizations in Central America and Mexico, several of whom have also been *socios* of Rimisp (others were not aware of Rimisp's existence). That project enquired into the strategies, roles and future contributions of such organizations and has served as a very useful counterpoint and complement to this study.

⁸ Although for politic reasons, certain information is not reported, this does not have implications vis à vis the conclusions drawn.

Theorizing the informal university: concepts for thinking about Rimisp

In his interpretation of the relationships among politics, economy and religion in post-World War II Latin America, David Lehmann places considerable importance on the rise of a certain type of non-governmental organization: those that combine grassroots work with various forms of research, publication and knowledge generation (Lehmann, 1990). He suggests that such organizations played an important part in processes of democratization in the region, largely due to their roles in broadening particular types of public spheres and placing both academic and social movement knowledge within those public spheres. Lehmann referred to such organizations as the "informal university," not only to draw attention to the intellectual nature of their work but also to suggest that their emergence was an effect of particular political and financial pressures on the formal university during that period. At the same time, this characterization (and Lehmann's analysis) suggested that the contribution of such centers was distinct from that of universities. Their private, not-for-profit nature allowed them to do and say things, to bridge the research and public spheres, to bridge direct engagement and knowledge production etc., in ways that universities simply could not.

Of course, such non-profit research centers also exist in countries where political and financial pressures are not so intense (Stone, 2002; Stone and Denham, 2004; Maxwell and Stone, 2004), suggesting that their emergence is not due only to the constraints on universities. However, it is also the case that many such centers are linked closely to political parties, interest groups or government departments, and/or exist largely as consultancies. Such linkages serve as a source of both financial support and political legitimacy, but also raise questions as to how best to theorize about these non-profit research centers. While the tendency is to refer to them as civil society organizations, this is perhaps not the most helpful way to conceptualize (for example) a think-tank that draws the majority of its financial support from the UK's Department for International Development, that is closely linked to the UK Labour Party or that is funded primarily by US-based energy companies. These examples do not describe Rimisp's own situation, but suggest that it is probably not enough to say that Rimisp is a civil society organization or think-tank: it is necessary to discern the source of Rimisp's legitimacy – not in order to make normative judgments about its work, but in order to be clearer about its role, and the relationships and sources of legitimacy that must be most carefully nurtured. Indeed, too often non-profits presume they are legitimate due to their non-profit and "civil society" status. Yet, as the literature is clear that such claims are simply not enough (Edwards and Hulme, 1995; Hulme and Edwards, 1997).

Another axis around which we have ordered our thinking about Rimisp's identity and place is suggested in recent work by Evelina Dagnino and colleagues (2006). Rather than use a language of state, market and civil society to help locate the niche and roles of particular (non-governmental) actors in fostering inclusion and democracy,⁹ they suggest that it is more helpful to consider their relationship to larger political projects that cut across the spheres of state and

⁹ While Dagnino et al. are particularly concerned about democratization, Rimisp's institutional objective is to "promover el aprendizaje organizacional y la innovación en las políticas, proyectos y programas públicos y privados, para promover la inclusión, la equidad, el bienestar y el desarrollo democrático en las sociedades rurales latinoamericanas," and in this sense is not especially distinct.

civil society. They identify three such meta-projects in contemporary Latin America: a neoliberal (or neoliberal deepening)¹⁰ project, a direct democracy (or democracy deepening) project, and an authoritarian project. The advantage of such a framework is that it avoids the issue of whether or not an organization is an NGO or a social movement (etc.), and asks instead that an organization's essence be identified in terms of what it stands for and contributes to. This approach may also be helpful given that the ways in which other actors relate to an organization probably depend more on its relationship to distinct projects rather than its relative purity as a civil society, market or state actor.¹¹

A drawback of Dagnino et al.'s characterization however, is that it may be too blunt to accommodate the different hybrids that existing in the region. Some of these hybrids might simply be – in Dagnino's et al.'s language – instances of "perverse convergence" in which a neoliberal project appears to open scope for participation but in practice does so in a way that further undermines the concepts of universal rights and social justice. Others, however, may not be perverse, and may involve serious attempts to explore ways in which markets can be used (and governed) so as to allocate resources to foster greater social inclusion. Indeed, a second drawback of the framework is the tendency to associate the participatory democratic project with political practices, and the neoliberal project with market based practices.¹² Yet there are evidently projects – both globally and in the region – seeking forms of market development that foster inclusion either directly (through addressing who has access to these markets) or indirectly (through addressing the quality of growth that market development delivers). Such hybrids have different origins, often depending on the institutional context in which they have been elaborated. Some have grown out of the institutional and informational turn in economics, some from efforts to refashion socialist and social democratic political projects so that they allow markets to play a bigger role in resource allocation and the creation of opportunities, some are based in real world exigencies encountered by left of centre political projects when they assume positions of political power and need to manage resource scarcity and fiscal constraints. Whether referred to as the post-Washington Consensus (Fine, 2001; 1999), the Third Way (Giddens, 1998), or some other epithet, such efforts at hybridizing aspects of both neoliberalism's commitment to the role of markets and of social democracies' commitment to the importance of governing markets so that they are less exclusive, are present in projects in contexts as diverse as Lula's Brazil, the Concertación's Chile, New Labour's Britain or even the World Bank's *World Development Report* of 2006 on Equity.¹³ Hybrids such as these offer a fourth political project to add to Dagnino et al.'s trinity. This schema can help not only to locate Rimisp, but also to shed light on its role and niche in the region.

¹⁰ The parentheses suggest my own paraphrases of Dagnino et al.'s categories.

¹¹ In the specific language of development, Mitlin et al. (2006) make a similar argument, suggesting that the more helpful way of thinking about development NGOs maybe in terms of their relationships to the types of "alternative" that they are seeking to promote – more reformist, within-system alternatives, or more systemic, beyond-system alternatives.

¹² Though the authors do note – albeit briefly – emerging experiments with the "social economy" as part of a participatory democratic project.

¹³ This is not to suggest that these examples are the same, though there are clearly what Jamie Peck has referred to as "family resemblances."

A final axis for thinking about the work, nature and niche of an organization such as Rimisp comes from understandings of the linkages between research/policy, and research/social change. Diane Stone (2002) suggests that there are predominantly three categories of explanation used to explore obstacles to research-policy linkages: supply side explanations (suggesting that the main problem is to do with problems in the quality, usefulness and communication of research); demand side explanations (suggesting that the main problems are to do with lack of political will or the lack of technical ability amongst policy makers to use research-based knowledge); and embeddedness explanations (suggesting that the main problems are related to weak links between research centers and the social actors that drive policy change). These three explanations might well be related to two broad approaches to research-policy linkages: approaches that can be characterized as the “short route” from research to policy and the “long route” (Bebbington and Barrientos, 2005). Supply and demand side explanations of the obstacles to research policy linkages imply that once the related problems are resolved, then research should become relevant to and influential in policy formation. Therefore supply and demand side explanations keep the possibility and desirability of following a *short route* from researchers to policy makers open. Conversely, embeddedness explanations suggest that for research to influence policy, it is important that research centers embed themselves in particular social actors who will then take the knowledge that the centers produce (knowledge made more relevant through this process of becoming embedded) and use it internally both in practices and efforts to influence policy: a *longer route* from research to policy.

The two routes have different institutional implications for research centres. The short route suggests a more rapid, less costly and a more elitist and technocratic approach to research-policy linkages, while also implying that research center legitimacy would be derived primarily from the professional quality of their staff and their particular studies, as well as from personal linkages with policy makers and policy framers. The long route suggests a slower, more expensive process and perhaps one that requires more grassroots oriented political commitments. In following the longer route, research centers would seek legitimacy primarily from the quality and depth of their relationships with social change actors, and from the ways in which this embeddedness affected the research process. How a knowledge generating organization places itself with respect to the short and long route options will influence the types of internal capacity and external relationships it feels are most important to strengthen, the ways in which it structures itself institutionally and geographically, how it claims legitimacy for the work that it does and quite possibly the larger political project within which it locates itself. With these conceptual axes in mind then – sources of legitimacy, positioning vis-à-vis larger political and development projects, and approaches to research-policy linkages - we now will analyze and explore Rimisp.

Section 1: The history and current core activities of Rimisp

History – a tale of two Rimisps

Institutional histories are an important part of any assessment of the future roles, relevance, and niches for institutions. At the same time, institutional histories can help to explain the ways that institutions have evolved, how they have performed, the (public and private) identities that have developed, and the types of relationships that they have cultivated over time. History is certainly important for any understanding of Rimisp. It also demonstrates some of the long term payoffs from earlier decades of support to the social relationships that underlay the rise of farming systems research (FSR) and its early interfaces with new agendas for rural development during the 1980s. Hence, we begin with a review of how Rimisp emerged and has changed over time.

The legacies of RIMISP's creation

The roots of some of the most important internal and external relationships that continue to sustain Rimisp today can be traced back to its creation (1986) and its reorientation (1995).¹⁴ As the name suggests, Rimisp began as a network of IDRC-supported farming systems projects throughout Latin America. The network, which had antecedents in a CATIE based group of researchers interested in FSR, was first supported through operational funds from the (then) IDRC program officer, Germán Escobar at whose initiative the network was fostered in 1986. In 1987 Escobar met Julio Berdegú during a meeting with the Chilean NGO the Grupo de Investigaciones Agrarias (GIA) for whom Berdegú was then working – with the research assistance of Eduardo Ramírez – in a production systems project supported by IDRC. Escobar invited Berdegú to assume coordination of this emerging network and by 1989 the network was sufficiently consolidated to receive a three year IDRC grant. This first grant was channeled through GIA.

Initially, Rimisp brought together three professionals who would later be the first three (today – three of its seven) principal researchers, and a relationship with IDRC, which continues to be one of its principal funders (in particular for work of a more applied/strategic research orientation as opposed to an applied/operational orientation. At that time, Rimisp was not an organization but rather a network with the primary role during this first phase, of strengthening research capacities (the first phase ran through two IDRC grants, 1989-1992 and 1992-1994/5). In particular, the emphasis was on building methodological capacities in more quantitatively oriented, systems modeling forms of research, and the second grant had the following main objectives (Mutsaers, 1994):

- Assisting network members in developing solutions to methodological problems in technology projects
- Exchanging methodology among network members and other IDRC projects

¹⁴ This section draws on Mutsaers, 1994 and Piña, 2005, as well as on various interviews.

- Providing technical support and training to member institutions and others as well as consolidating Rimisp institutionally, by creating an elected decision making body and broadening its financial base.

Since this initial period, Rimisp has come a long way in substantive terms. That said, certain ways of working and being were established in the early days that continue to be a part of the ways in which Rimisp operates and exists today. First of all, Rimisp was a network with a minimal hub – that is to say, it was not a network with a large number of centrally located staff. However, its functioning depended significantly on the leadership of its coordinator, Julio Berdegué, and the support from Eduardo Ramírez. Secondly, Rimisp combined a network structure (by 1994, it was a network made up of 32 member institutions) with a closed competitive research grant mechanism in which grants were allocated for work on pre-defined, collectively determined themes. That is, members were able to bid for grants that would support work to address methodological problems that the collective of members had identified as relevant during network meetings. Thirdly, Rimisp was an organization that had a Latin America wide reach but that was coordinated from Chile and that only existed as a legal entity within Chile. Indeed, the external evaluation of Rimisp in 1994 (Mutsaers, 1994) noted that once the coordinator's mandate ended (intended for 1995), if the next coordinator was not based in Chile, then Rimisp would have to resolve the problem of existing legally only in this one country.¹⁵ Fourthly, though it had not been very successful in terms of using the internet as a means of communication, by 1994 this was an important part of Rimisp's stated strategy.¹⁶

These precedents set something of an operational style within Rimisp that continues today. Thus, it was only in 1998 that Rimisp had, for the first time ever, more than one in-house principal investigator (when German Escobar joined Rimisp from IICA), and only in 2000 did it hire a third PI. The minimal hub model, combined with extensive social relationships has characterized most of Rimisp's history suggesting that it is only very recently that Rimisp has become an institution that can be said to exist independently of one or two individuals. Likewise, the model for managing competitive funding mechanisms to allocate resources for work on a predefined topic continues to be one of Rimisp's main ways of operating (as is later demonstrated in the case of Chorlaví and the Program on Social Movements, Environmental Governance and Rural Territorial Development). Also, being a Chilean based regional organization continues to be a challenge. Finally, internet has become one of the defining features of the way Rimisp operates.

There is one important difference between the Rimisp of the past (Rimisp-1), and the Rimisp that has emerged in recent years (Rimisp-2), a change exemplified by its revised name. Rimisp was, until 1995, a network – albeit one whose success was dependent on the dynamism of a (very modest) hub. Since 1995, Rimisp has ceased to be a network (in a formal sense, at least) and became its own organization (we comment on the reasons for this below). However, the

¹⁵ The evaluator suggested that the resolution to this problem was to keep Rimisp based in IICA, as it had been since 1991.

¹⁶ The author recalls conversations in the early 1990s on the GIA patio with an animated Julio Berdegué, excited by the potential of internet for rural development. Note also that Rimisp already had relationships with Bob Hart (another CATIE antecedent) – Hart's INFORUM was an early international leader and innovator in the role of internet for information exchange in agricultural development and natural resources management.

centrality of network management – and networking – has not been lost as a way of working and being. All Rimisp projects of any significant size aim to both build regional information networks and to use more bounded networks of learning partners as the primary vehicle for implementing their work.

We have already commented on the continuing importance of the internal relationships established early on in the process of Rimisp's development. However, a number of the network relationships established also continue to be important for Rimisp. In several cases, Rimisp's current research consortia and relationships include partners who participated in the Rimisp network that existed between 1986 and 1995.¹⁷ It is also notable that if we look at the current board of Condesan, three of the eight current and incoming directors were among the subset of the strongest partners at the core of Rimisp, and a fourth is Rimisp's President.¹⁸

Near death, resurrection and their legacies

In 1994 the relationship between Rimisp and IDRC ended, somewhat abruptly, and so Rimisp as a network for linking farming systems research projects did not enter into a third phase. The end of that financial relationship coincided with the departure of the coordinator of Rimisp (the network) from a senior management and strategic position in INDAP. This created both the imperative and momentum for Rimisp to renew itself. For a short time Rimisp was the vehicle for a series of short-term contracts that kept it alive. The first large grant post-IDRC came from the European Economic Community (DGXII) to support research on hybridizing qualitative-quantitative approaches for evaluating the sustainability of agricultural systems in the Southern Cone countries of Latin America. The idea for the project grew out of an earlier (1994) Rimisp training event on methods for operationalizing the concept of sustainability in agricultural systems. At the same time the project was also important because it presaged a new way of working (involving a core set of partners in decentralized but coordinated work) and helped to open up relationships with organizations and individuals that would prove to be valuable in the future.¹⁹

Over the same period of transition out of IDRC support, another relationship was developing. During its network phase, Rimisp had begun to develop a modest relationship with IFAD (in part via training events run by PROCASUR, one of IFAD's earliest regional programs in Latin America, with historical links to GIA), and by the mid-1990s Rimisp began to propose slightly larger scale work to IFAD – work that would hinge on the use of internet as a means for enhancing communication and learning networks among IFAD projects. IFAD staff took the project and turned the idea into something far larger than Rimisp had initially envisaged, and in

¹⁷ Though often the more important dimensions of these relationships have been personal ties as opposed to an institutional relationship. Indeed, it is fair to say that Rimisp works with networks of people not organizations.

¹⁸ And IDRC, one of Rimisp's main financiers is the observer on the Condesan Board, reflecting IDRC's prominent role in funding Condesan. Indeed, the continuity of relationships reflected here reflects the extent to which the initial Rimisp network consolidated a set of core partners for IDRC. Information from Condesan website, accessed February 7, 2006.

¹⁹ The partners were RIMISP, CIRAD, IIED, ILEIA, INTA and Ecoforça. Among these the relationships with IIED and Irene Guijt continue to be very important in terms of how Rimisp works on both markets and learning systems.

November 1995 funding was approved for FIDAMERICA, a regional network of IFAD projects (Piña, 2005). Rimisp was the coordinator/facilitator of this network and responsible for executing its activities.²⁰ This project marked the initiation of the second of Rimisp's most important funding and policy thinking relationships – that with IFAD.

When FIDAMERICA began, Rimisp (the network) still existed, at least in part, and one of FIDAMERICA's goals was to facilitate IFAD projects access to the knowledge base embodied in Rimisp's network. More generally, though, it aimed to enhance communication among IFAD projects in Latin America as well as between these projects and IFAD headquarters, and to improve access to information. This spirit – that of enhancing communication and learning within IFAD projects, with a particular though not exclusive focus on the use of internet – has been sustained through subsequent phases of FIDAMERICA (Rubinoff, 2003), though these later phases placed increasing emphasis on building capacities within projects to systematize experiences, learn and communicate, and on face-to-face as well as electronic interaction (Piña, 2005).

Rimisp has coordinated and executed all three phases of FIDAMERICA (1995-1998, 1998-2002, and 2002-2005), giving it a particularly privileged position in relation to IFAD and its broad network of projects in Latin America. Rimisp will now implement a fourth phase of FIDAMERICA (from 2006 onwards). Indeed, one evaluator from FIDAMERICA concluded that its success and continuing viability required that "the agency implementing the regional program be a prestigious entity, fully involved in networking" (Piña, 2005:28, my translation):²¹ in short, Rimisp was as important to the viability of FIDAMERICA, as FIDAMERICA was to Rimisp. This is a great achievement on Rimisp's part, but also creates the perception in some quarters that Rimisp is far too financially dependent on IFAD.²² While this perception may not be entirely correct, there is no doubt that IFAD has been a very important partner for Rimisp – both in terms of finances and institutional identity.

Back to IDRC (or, for IDRC, back to Rimisp)

Rimisp (the network) came to an end somewhat abruptly when IDRC withdrew support, and the Agriculture, Food and Nutrition program of IDRC was closed. IDRC then reorganized, with much of its rural work shifting to a natural resource (as opposed to food system) focus, embodied in the Minga program. By 1997, with the basic design principles of Minga decided, the leader of Minga and Director of IDRC's Montevideo office approached Julio Berdegú to ask if Rimisp

²⁰ It merits note that this process was also facilitated by another of Rimisp's (the network) close relationships, with INFORUM. INFORUM – which itself embodied a combined fascination for FSR and the use of internet – had coordinated an earlier internet-based information exchange project for IFAD projects internationally. The success of that project helped lay the foundation for IFAD's interest in the Rimisp, Latin America focused project. More important, though, was that Bob Hart recommended RIMISP to IFAD – and IFAD highly valued his reference.

²¹ The original is: "el ejecutor del programa regional sea una entidad prestigiosa y enrolada decididamente en el trabajo de redes."

²² In practice, Rimisp has depended on IFAD for 16% of its budget at most. However, the impression of greater dependence is very real for some observers.

would be interested in implementing a competitive fund within the broader Minga program. This fund would support research, learning and the systematization of experiences in monitoring and evaluation linked to natural resource management, and would culminate in an edited collection (Berdegúe and Escobar, 2000). This fund was the first ever competitive fund within Minga, though subsequently the program initiated another two programs, both inspired by Rimisp's "Minga Fund" model.²³

By 1997/98, the strategic relationship with IDRC that had driven the creation and first seven years of Rimisp, was re-initiated. This has lasted through to the present and continues to be one of Rimisp's most important partnerships. Furthermore, the form that it took in 1997/8 has marked Rimisp's way of working since that time, for while Rimisp (the network) and FIDAMERICA had used a *form of* competitive fund – one only accessible to network members – Rimisp's Minga Fund used an open access competitive fund to build a network and identify new partners. This meant that the sequencing of network formation and fund allocation was reversed, so the social basis of network membership was quite distinct. In a certain sense, the Minga Fund created a community of practice, while Rimisp (the network) and FIDAMERICA worked with already constituted communities whose common ground lay in shared sources of financial support. The Minga Fund mechanism has continued to operate both in subsequent incarnations of the fund (in the Fondo Minka de Chorlaví) and in Rimisp's more recent social movements program.²⁴

From methodology, to development, to research

Another shift was also occurring over this period. Rimisp-1's primary interest had been farming systems research with a special concern for methodology. FIDAMERICA (and perhaps also Julio Berdegúe's personal experience in INDAP) began to pull Rimisp away from systems and methods towards rural development and development interventions. The link to Minga, while concerned with natural resources, had a similar effect in that it brought Rimisp into close contact with organizations involved in rural development activities. Until 1996, however, whether the concern was with FSR or rural development, Rimisp played the role of an organization that supported learning and did so in a way that could help others generate (generally quite applied) knowledge. It had, however, done relatively little as a research actor itself except for in the EEC funded project. 1997, however, saw it begin to open up research as an area of work – and, more importantly perhaps, to do so in a way that began to take research away from a production systems and technology focus. While IDRC did not initially support this research, it was at an IDRC meeting on poverty and environment that the idea began to take form and ultimately Rimisp put together and led a consortium of institutions²⁵ that won a grant from the newly created Fontagro (the Fondo Regional de Tecnología Agropecuaria), a fund managed by the InterAmerican Development Bank and supported by member countries.²⁶

²³ These were: a fund addressing "Conflicts and Collaboration" implemented by the University for Peace in Costa Rica; and a "Coastal Resources Management" fund implemented by Laval University, in Quebec, Canada.

²⁴ In a sense, this shift in approach to networking might be thought of as a move from using hierarchies to build networks to using markets for the building of networks.

²⁵ These were: Embrapa, CIP, Michigan State University, Flacso, Corpoica and the University of Caldas, Ivis.

²⁶ Though today IDRC is also a member: information accessed from Fontagro website, 7th February 2006.

Just as the Rimisp (the network) model served to establish ways of working that have continued, so did this research project. The essence of this working method was to put a research consortium (or bounded network) together, meet together to discuss a general research idea, turn that idea into a detailed research project, seek funding, implement the project among the associates of the consortium, meet to discuss results and publish results preferably in a special issue of an English language development studies journal as well as in Spanish.²⁷ This initiative was accompanied by another on peasant economic organizations ("Cooperating to Compete") supported by INDAP and FAO, and was followed by another IDB funded project on rural non-farm employment in Latin America that followed a very similar process and brought several of the same actors together.²⁸ Of particular importance is that this latter initiative sustained the relationship with the Department of Agricultural Economics at Michigan State University – in particular with T. Reardon – that has subsequently proven to be another critical partnership in Rimisp's own research and in its projection into the world of Anglophone development studies journals. Indeed, the non-farm rural employment (ERNA is the Spanish acronym) collection of studies was followed by a similar initiative on the changing role of supermarkets in structuring Latin American food systems, also coordinated jointly with Reardon at MSU. It is also important that these rural non-farm employment and supermarket projects opened and/or consolidated relationships with several multilaterals (especially the World Bank and IDB) and bilaterals (particularly DfID), who both sponsored the research and took particular interest in its substance. Indeed, one lesson from this period is that in order to engage these organizations at a policy dialogue level, it is vital to do research – implementing capacity building and learning network projects is not sufficient.

While these projects did not involve financial resources on the same scale as Rimisp (the network) or FIDAMERICA, they did bring a different kind of capital to Rimisp. First of all, as already noted, they helped to diversify funding relationships.²⁹ Secondly, they helped to establish Rimisp as a legitimate and important research player in the region and perhaps just as importantly distanced it clearly from its earlier identity that was linked to farming systems research – though the close links with US economics/agricultural economics in the first three projects did perhaps suggest a lingering and continuing quantitative orientation.³⁰

Thirdly, and most importantly, these projects – in particular those on non-farm rural employment – began to create what might be called a new "epistemic community" (cf. Haas, 1992). In opening discussions related to the structural changes that were occurring in the Latin American rural economy with new agency partners (IDB, FAO, World Bank, DfID and others) as well as new research partners (particularly in Brazil), a community of policy thinking and framing began

²⁷ The resulting publications were, in English, Swinton et al. 2003 and in Spanish, Escobar, 2003.

²⁸ Though the final publication came out earlier (Reardon et al., 2001).

²⁹ These financial partners included, in order of financial (if not policy dialogue) importance: the EEC (sustainability of agricultural systems); IDB-Fontagro (poverty-environment links); IDB, FAO (each non-farm rural employment); and DfID-World Bank (non-farm employment and supermarkets).

³⁰ This is not to say that the farming systems dimension of its work was lost entirely. Indeed, Rimisp played (and continues to play) an important role in organizing each of the Latin American Farming Systems (IESA) symposia, and hosted the 2000 Global FSR Symposium in 2000. However, the weight of farming systems and methodological work within Rimisp's portfolio of activities and partners has reduced significantly, with the concomitant increase in activities related to development and to research.

to develop, hinging on the rural development unit within the IDB, Rimisp and policy oriented academic economists (such as A. de Janvry and T. Reardon). This community collaborated in working through the implications of the structural changes for rural development theory and strategy. The IDB link was especially important as it provided the nexus to the "Inter Agency Group on Rural Development" that it was fostering as well as to a series of IDB general meetings. These spaces served as one of several recurrent points of contact for this epistemic community, and in time became the forum in which another (closely related) set of ideas about Territorially Based Rural Development would also emerge (see below).

Reopening the NGO front

By the late 1990s, Rimisp's largest project was FIDAMERICA, while its international reputation (which, it should be noted, was at this time that of three principal researchers) was sustained and projected by these smaller research activities as well as a grueling round of networking, keynote presentations and other activities that kept Rimisp visible. At this time, Rimisp was already a hybrid organization. On the one hand it provided development support services – in the form of FIDAMERICA, and all the related capacity building, information brokering, communication and learning. On the other hand, through its research activities, it convened and contributed to thinking on emerging issues in Latin American rural development.

This double identity also linked Rimisp to two distinct networks: one, bringing together leading thinkers (primarily economists) on the contemporary transformations affecting rural Latin America, the other linking development projects (primarily supported by IFAD) that aimed to respond to and continue to be relevant in the face of these transformations. If not entirely by design, these two orientations, and two networks, provided Rimisp with (two) parts needed to build a coherent whole: one part analyzing macro processes of change, and the other supporting and learning with development projects dealing with this change, systematizing their experiences *en route*.

In the late 1990s, however, these two networks lacked breadth: project and related links were primarily with official funding flows and research links had a notable orientation towards US based (if not US nationality) development economists. The period since can be viewed as one in which Rimisp (deliberately or not) broadened each of the networks supporting the two parts of this apparently coherent whole. The project and learning networks were expanded to include actors linked to other types of aid flow (particularly non-governmental flows) and who were not large scale rural development projects. Thus this network has been expanded to include, through different projects: municipalities, national and quite local NGOs, producer organizations and (to a still lesser extent) social movements. At the same time, the research networks have both become more international and grown to include a wider range of disciplinary perspectives.

It is not that Rimisp had sustained no contact with NGOs – Julio Berdegú and Eduardo Ramírez came from an NGO background, one that was a member of ALOP no less (the Latin American Association of Social Change Organizations), and Rimisp (the network) had several important

NGO associates.³¹ These relationships were not, however, Rimisp's strongest. This began to change in 1998 when ALOP and ICCO invited Julio Berdegú to an ICCO sponsored meeting of its grantees, ALOP members, social organizations and other actors in the Hacienda Chorlaví, Ecuador. The purpose of that meeting was to explore the possibility of creating a network and process through which NGOs and producer/peasant organizations (the majority of ICCO's portfolio in Latin America) might exchange ideas and information, and learn together on rural development issues. The meeting chose to pursue such a strategy (at a time when ICCO was ever more convinced of the importance of networks in rural development), and named the initiative known as the Grupo Chorlaví. When ICCO and ALOP then tendered the coordination and implementation of this network, Rimisp won the contract and became the executing agency in much the same way as it executed FIDAMERICA. This brought Rimisp closer to ALOP (whose Executive Secretary from that time has since become a Rimisp PI) and Rimisp members were brought closer to the wider world of rural development NGOs in Latin America to which Chorlaví's activities were targeted, and also to ICCO with its own international NGO networks and concerns.

By 2000, Rimisp was grounded in these three large contracts (FIDAMERICA, Chorlaví, Fondo Minga) and its emergent research work (which tended to be organized as bundles of smaller contracts). As a whole, this package gave Rimisp connections to IFAD networks, NGO networks, and research networks with close relationships to the institutions of foreign aid in Latin America.

Rimisp from 2000 on: activities and identities

Current activities

Partly on the basis of this history, Rimisp identifies its institutional goal and strategies as follows: "to promote organizational learning and innovation in public and private projects, programs and policies in order to promote inclusion, equity, well being and democratic development and Latin American rural societies."³² In the language of its formal institutional statements, it seeks these goals through four principal types of activity:

- Multidisciplinary, applied research
- The systematization of innovative experiences
- Developing capacities among actors working in poverty reduction projects, programs and policies
- Influencing decision making processes

³¹ Including Grade, CAAP, CEGA, Fundagro, Ecoforça.

³² In Spanish: "promover el aprendizaje organizacional y la innovación en las políticas, proyectos y programas públicos y privados, para promover la inclusión, la equidad, el bienestar y el desarrollo democrático en las sociedades rurales latinoamericanas."

The primary mechanism through which it pursues these strategies is the *project*. Indeed, while RIMISP has many individual contracts, its work routines, identity and brand integrity (see later) are defined by a smaller packet of large projects, each with its own principal donor.³³ In practice, the number of large projects at any one time appears defined³⁴ by the number of principal investigators, this is due to the model in which each PI is expected – indeed required – to be responsible for a large project which covers fifty percent of that PI's time and salary cost (for more on this, see the Section 3).

At present, the structure is defined by the following large projects (see Box 1 for a short description of each project):

- FIDAMERICA, financed by IFAD
- Grupo Chorlavi, financed by IDRC and ICCO
- Territorios rurales en movimiento, financed by IDRC
- Territorios con identidad cultural, financed by Ford Foundation
- Municipios indígenas, financed by NZAid
- Argentina Rural, the elaboration of a proposal for a national rural development strategy for Argentina, funded by the "Multi-donor program for the elimination of rural poverty in Latin America and the Caribbean", a joint initiative of IFAD, IDB and the government of Italy and housed in IFAD
- Regoverning markets, funded by various donors. One source of funds comes from a donor consortium supported fund hosted by IIED in London, which is channeled to Rimisp; a second source involves funds deriving in particular (though not only) from relationships with MSU.
- In addition, the Presidency of Rimisp is considered to be a large project and is funded (as a 50% position) from overhead payments generated by the remainder of Rimisp's activities. This however, is an administrative role and in the role of researcher, the President will also be PI on a major research program (currently for Regoverning Markets).

Several new initiatives are also beginning: a sub-contract with the LSE as a member of an LSE led, DfID funded consortium working on institutions for pro-poor growth (an initiative which, in staff funding terms, will replace Argentina Rural); a program of work in Chile, grounded at present in large scale evaluations; and a likely renewal of Territorios Rurales en Movimiento. Complementing these large projects financially – and where possible intellectually – there are a large number of small consultancies and small grant based activities.

This package of activities is represented diagrammatically in Figures 1 and 2. Figure 1 is simply a timeline showing the steady (and recently more rapid) increase in the number of large projects over time. Figure 2 shows the current spread of large projects, while at the same time giving

³³ There are exceptions to this rule. Chorlavi has two main donors (IDRC and ICCO) and Rimisp's research activities have typically involved constellations of donors each contributing (generally) more modest amounts to a "pot" of activities. Antecedents of this model were the research on non-farm rural employment and work on peasant economic organizations.

³⁴ This is not exactly how it appears. The Presidency is also responsible for one main research project; and at certain moments a PI may be responsible for two projects, when one is winding down and the other just beginning.

graphic representation to the financial implications of these projects. In the figure, the green oval represents the annual cost of running Rimisp. As is clear, none of the large projects cover a significant percentage of this annual cost. Furthermore, the diagram also seeks to show that much (most) of the budget of large projects is spent outside Rimisp – that is, as pass through to partners and sub-contractees who constitute part of each project and as operational costs of the project. Indeed, a rough estimate (calculated by Rimisp) is that in 2005 such flow through accounted for fully 69% of Rimisp's total work and administrative budget. In such a situation, the smaller grants and contracts that Rimisp wins are critical in order to cover the remainder of Rimisp's core budget needs (the remaining green area in the diagram).

Box 1:

Rimisp's principal projects: brief descriptions³⁵

- ***FIDAMERICA (1995 – 2004; 2006-2009)***

FIDAMERICA is Rimisp's oldest, large project dating back to 1995. Formally this is an IFAD Technical Assistance grant that Rimisp is contracted to implement, guided (inter alia) by both the project document and an Advisory Board. The grant provides for support to IFAD supported rural development projects in Latin America and the Caribbean. The support revolves around communication and learning, with a particular emphasis on the use of information technology. In its earliest phases this project began as assistance to other projects in installing email and learning how to use both email and the internet as communication and learning technologies (for instance, projects were assisted in how to use the internet to search for information on technologies, markets, prices etc.). Over time it has redirected focus to a systematization of experiences on a range of topics, and supporting a suite of methods (e.g. meetings, e-conferences) for exchanging learning among projects (Piña, 2005).

- ***Grupo Chorlavi (1997-2007; extension possible)***

The Grupo Chorlavi is a fusion of two initial experiences. One of these, the Grupo Chorlavi, was a learning group of NGOs and rural people's organizations interested in rural development (many with links to ICCO). Founded in 1998, this was implemented with ICCO support, and coordinated from ALOP (the Latin American Association of Social Change Organizations). Again, Rimisp was contracted as the implementing agency. The main mechanisms included a fund to support organizations' internal learning, and e-conferences. The second tributary was the Fondo Minga, supported by IDRC. This competitive fund had from 1997 onwards supported learning among rural development organizations in natural resource and rural development monitoring and evaluation issues, and was implemented by Rimisp. In 2000/2001, at Rimisp's initiative the two funding initiatives were merged into one, which first took the name Fondo Minga-Chorlavi during the period 2001-2004 (this because the Fondo had one governance mechanism and the Grupo had another). In 2004 it was renamed "the Grupo Chorlavi" and all activities and governance mechanisms were merged, when the constituent parts (ALOP, ICCO and IDRC) felt sufficient trust and comfort with the merging process (Escobar et al., 2006). The

³⁵ Dates refer to start and end of the formal contracts.

Group is governed by a Council, initially named by the donors, now self-governing, with decision-making powers.

- ***Territorios rurales en movimiento (2003-2006, second phase likely)***

This program, funded solely by IDRC, was designed to explore the relationships between social movements, environmental governance and territorially based rural development (DTR), reflecting a somewhat awkward merging of interests between IDRC (environmental governance) and Rimisp (DTR) and an emerging but unconsolidated interest of both parties in social movements. The program was administered as a grant to Rimisp, with a core group (Grupo Nucleo) of socios serving as the management committee (Grade and Cepes of Peru; PIEB of Bolivia; DIIS of Denmark; the Faculty of Economics, Administration and Accountancy of the University of São Paulo). The program's primary instruments were subcontracts to support general and topical literature reviews, a competitive research fund to support seven research projects, and additional subcontracts to support secondary research in areas defined by the program. The program also sought to order knowledge on social movements involved in the program's areas of main thematic interest in Latin America. The program's learning mechanisms included an electronic conference (planned but not realized), intermediate seminars, a final conference, and publications.

- ***Territorios con identidad cultural (2005-)***

This program is funded by the Ford Foundation's Southern Cone office that allowed its primarily micro-finance oriented program to include a significant research program on business support services while increasing its regional coverage through Rimisp's own networks. The program seeks to understand the conditions under which actors in rural territories are able to foster processes of development through the sale of products and services imbued with cultural identity to dynamic markets. The main instruments of the project – administered by Rimisp and advised by a committee of six individuals (three Rimisp, three external) are: a limited number of territorially based studies of such processes of transformation, workshops, and exchanges.

- ***Municipios indígenas (2005-2009)***

This Project, financed as a grant from NZAid to Rimisp, identifies innovative experiences in governance and livelihood improvement in Andean and Central American municipalities characterized by significant indigenous populations and high poverty incidence. With the goals of enhancing both municipal capacities and national and international policy understanding in these thematic areas, the project aims to: build a learning network linking over a dozen such municipal experiences; support specific learning activities within these municipalities; foster workshops allowing municipal and development agencies to debate and extract policy lessons; and establish internet based information dissemination mechanisms. The project is implemented by Rimisp, and guided by a steering committee composed of three external members³⁶ and the PI from Rimisp.

³⁶ The project document noted five, one named by NZAid.

- ***Argentina Rural (2004-2006)***

This project, referred to by Rimisp as Argentina Rural, is in fact a technical assistance grant from IFAD to Rimisp, for Rimisp to support the Government of Argentina in the preparation of a national strategy for rural development. The project was implemented in conjunction with a technical committee of four people in Argentina, and a local coordinator. The project represented an effort to apply Rimisp thinking to territorially based rural development in the context of broad government policy – offering the opportunity to take a concept with which Rimisp had previously worked at more local levels to a national scale or at the level of general policy discussions within donor agencies. The project's primary instruments were: the subcontracting of a set of systematizations of territorially based processes of rural transformation and a series of thematic studies; the hosting a range of local and national workshops; and the preparation of a final strategy document (comprising both synthesis and component documents).

- ***Regoverning markets (2001-2008)***

This has been an area of work that has expanded progressively, and is primarily concerned with understanding: the conditions under which Latin American food chains have become increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small number of powerful market actors (in particular, but not only, supermarkets); the effects and implications of these processes for the small and medium-sized farm sector; and the possibilities and strategies through which such farmers, individually but more importantly through their organizations, might be able to increase their negotiating power with and within these chains, and so find ways of linking this sector of the rural economy with dynamic markets. Central to this area of work has been a strategic partnership between Rimisp and the Department of Agricultural Economics at Michigan State University, USA and subsequently with the International Institute for Environment and Development in the UK. These two partnerships have also been the main sources of funding for this work: MSU has channeled primarily USAID/USDA resources; and IIED hosts a multi-donor fund for a coordinated, multi-partner global program of work on the theme, “Regoverning Markets“. Rimisp was also one of the initial socios that began this global program. Rimisp coordinates the Latin American component of the global program (administered in partnership with ILRI, MSU and CIAT) as well as the program of case studies on successful linkages between small farmers and dynamic markets (jointly with KIT).

Figure 1
Major projects and funding flows

		86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07
IDRC	Rimisp network																						
EEC	Sustainability of Agricultural Systems																						
IFAD	Fidamerica																						
IDRC	Minka-Chorlavi																						
INDAP, FAO	Cooperating to Compete																						
ICCO	Chorlavi																						
IDRC	Social Movements																						
GoI, IFAD, IADB	Argentina																						
DfID, IDRC, ICCO, Cordaid	Regoverning Markets																						
Ford	Servicios Financieros Rurales																						
Ford	Territorios con Identidad Cultural																						
NZAid	Municipios Indigenas																						
DfID/LSE	Pro-poor Growth																						

**Figure 2:
RIMISP: Current
activities**

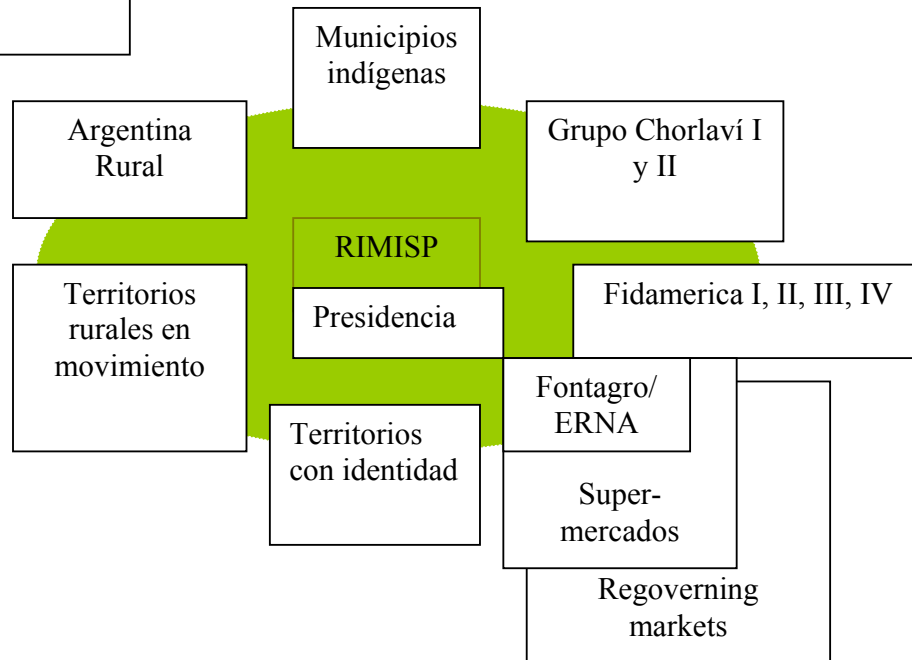


Figure 3 Principal investigators over time

		86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06
PIs	Julio Berdegúe																					
	Eduardo Ramírez																					
	Germán Escobar																					
	Alejandro Schejtman																					
	Manuel Chiriboga																					
	Gilles Cliché																					
	Claudia Ranaboldo																					
RAs	Alexis Ortiz																					
	Sergio Faigenbaum																					
	Pilar Jano																					
	José Bengoa																					
	Rodrigo García																					

As Figures 2 and 3 illustrate, the portfolio of large projects has increased significantly in recent years. This has been accompanied by a notable increase in the aggregate value of active projects in 2004 and 2005 and a trend towards an overall increase in the number of active projects (large and small) and the value of projects signed each year (Tables 1, 2, and 3). Growth has been accompanied by an increase in the number of principal investigators (PIs), from three in 2002 to seven at present (5 based in Santiago, one in La Paz and one in Quito), with the effect that the number of projects, value of projects and value of new projects annually per PI show no clear trend.

Table 1
Rimisp: Total value of active projects

Year	Value Thousand US \$	Percentage change on preceding year	Per PI value Thousand US \$
2000	2718	10	906
2001	3498	29	1316
2002	4117	18	1029
2003	2873	-30	575
2004	6039	110	1007
2005	5960	-1	851
Average	4201		947

Source: Rimisp, 2005

Table 2
Rimisp: Projects per year

Year	Total number of active projects	Total number of projects signed that6 calendar year	Per PI number of active projects
2000	35	22	12
2001	36	16	12
2002	43	22	11
2003	44	20	9
2004	51	34	9
2005	43	21	6
Average	42	23	10

Source: Rimisp, 2005

Table 3
Rimisp: Value of projects signed during calendar year

Year	Value Thousand US \$	Percentage change on preceding year	Per PI Value Thousand US \$
2000	545	-68	182
2001	1228	125	409
2002	1168	-5	292
2003	211	-82	42
2004	3715	1655	619
2005	1468	-60	210
Average	1389		292

Source: Rimisp, 2005

The rapid growth in the number and value of projects in recent years is not without challenges. In particular it raises questions about the coherence of the many different activities in progress, about how this growth affects the nature of Rimisp, and about the way in which Rimisp organizes itself internally. The following subsections discuss each of these points.

Generative concepts in Rimisp

While such rapid growth had the potential to undermine the coherence of Rimisp's portfolio of activities, in practice the projects are held together by a set of three more or less overlapping, broad, generative concepts. These are: learning networks, territorially based rural development, and pro-poor market deepening.^{37, 38} Importantly, within Rimisp each concept has both a positive and a normative moment. Of the three, the learning network has the longest history in Rimisp. As noted earlier, Rimisp was re-launched in 1995 on the basis of a commitment to (e-based) learning networks. Today the two projects most clearly grounded in this concept are FIDAMERICA and Chorlaví. Each promote intra-organizational and inter-organizational learning, in FIDAMERICA's case within and among IFAD supported rural development projects in Latin America and the Caribbean,³⁹ and in Chorlaví's case, within and among the ten or so organizations that win grants under the program's annual round of competitive funding. While each FIDAMERICA and Chorlaví project also aims to reach wider populations, and thus foster

³⁷ I considered calling this commodity chain or market penetration instead, but opted for market deepening because the commitment in Rimisp's work is that if markets can be broadened and deepened (implying the reduction of a range of barriers to entry and distortions) then opportunities for rural people will be opened up and their inclusion will be enhanced. There are evident resonances here with the language of the most recent World Development Report (WDR) on Equity and Development which also committed to this position (World Bank, 2006; see also Walton, 2004). It is close to the position of Adam Smith: liberal, Enlightenment-informed, and ethical.

³⁸ By the same token it is characterized by a relative absence of other concepts (of development as conflict, power, and social structure). We return to this later.

³⁹ Though the Caribbean involvement in these learning networks is, for language reasons, weak.

broader networks through the use of electronic newsletters and e-conferences, in practice emphasis is on the more immediate group of organizations.

Learning networks are thus something that Rimisp aims to build – and so the concept, in its positive sense, describes something that the projects bring into existence. They are also something that Rimisp values, understanding rural development partly as an extension and deepening of communities of learning throughout Latin America. It might be argued, in this sense, that through promotion of such networks Rimisp seeks to foster broad, idea (as opposed to protest) based social movements committed to elaborating a particular conception of rural development. This idea is most explicit in Chorlavi's yet to be realized aim of nurturing a continental network of change agents. However, it is present to a greater or lesser extent in each of Rimisp's larger projects, and indeed each of them (to different degrees), includes elements of networked, social learning among project participants and other interested parties.

Territorially based rural development and market deepening are formative concepts that have emerged with time, reflecting both Rimisp's cumulative learning from its projects, as well as the arrival of new staff to the organization. In a sense, the concepts of space and spatiality have been problems for Rimisp since its very origins. Anglophone farming systems research (that which dominated CGIAR centers, USAID cooperative programs and US land grant universities) struggled from early on with where to draw the boundaries of the system to be analyzed (field, farm, village) and whether to address linkages with out-of-system processes in terms of system nesting, or flows and cycles. Francophone concepts of *terroirs* and landscapes grounded in French geography and history had little resonance in these debates.⁴⁰ Rimisp grows out of this Anglophone tradition, and in some sense the evolution of its own core concepts reflect an effort to grapple with this problem of space. This was especially clear in the work on Non Agricultural Rural Employment (ERNA is the Spanish acronym; Reardon, Berdegúe and Escobar, 2001). The joint conclusions that ERNA was becoming increasingly important in Latin America and that a rural development strategy focused on agriculture would do little more than consign the rural poor to continued poverty, forced a search for other geographies as the unit of both analysis and intervention. There were several options here: labor market geographies, commodity chain geographies, local government geographies, or even core-periphery geographies. In this sense, the increasing prominence of territorially based rural development and market deepening in Rimisp's work might be taken to reflect the option for commodity chain and local government geographies over others.

A concept of “territory” now runs through the most of Rimisp's large projects (while also underlying much of the demand for its short-term consultancy work). The intellectual basis for this is codified in the enormously successful yet never formally published document on Territorially Based Rural Development, or DTR (Schejtman and Berdegúe, 2003), and a large part of Rimisp's portfolio has become a terrain in which to test, elaborate and disseminate this view of rural development. *Territorios con identidad cultural* thus explores the links with geographically specific identities and the possibility of pro-poor market formation; TREM struggled with the idea that social movements produced territories as politically contested spaces,

⁴⁰ And were probably, unfairly given their influence in Sahelian rural development, considered too academic and qualitative to be useful.

and will now transition into a program with a less politicized concept of territory; *Municipios indígenas* is interested in the roles of local government in fostering development in municipally defined territories with large indigenous populations; DTR is central to the core theme for Chorlavi's current period (2005-8); and Argentina Rural explored the potential of DTR as an articulating concept for a national rural development strategy. While "territory" is less central to FIDAMERICA and Regoverning Markets, the former has explored its relevance to IFAD projects.

All this said, the theorization of territory in this framework seems incomplete. While Rimisp might insist that territory, within DTR, is understood as a space that is imbued with identity, and is socially constructed through the interaction of a range of actors among whom exists a socially agreed upon project for this space, the precise meanings of these assertions remain far less clear than the meanings of other elements of DTR. Further refinement is required to discern, for example, how identities are produced, how certain identities become dominant in particular spaces, how identities can embody relationships of power and difference, and how development and identity constitute each other in ways that change over time and lead to changing senses of place and space. In the absence of such refinement, DTR ultimately seems to talk more convincingly about economically and administratively produced territories than about those that are socially and culturally produced.

The third concept – market deepening – is closely linked to this particular approach to DTR. Again, this is a concept with both positive and normative dimensions. Thus, Rimisp clearly conceptualizes rural Latin America as a space where development possibilities are increasingly structured around market relationships – a space in which the market drives development far more than either state or civil society. Rimisp also considers poverty to be more a result of insufficient rather than too much market development – with the caveat that new markets need to be inclusive and accessible to the poor. As such, the extent to and conditions under which rural people link to markets are directly linked to their well being. Rimisp's sensitivity to these processes of change in Latin America has led it to pick up on certain transformations (non-agricultural employment, the supermarketization of food chains) either earlier or, in the eyes of many observers, in more interesting ways than other analysts.

While commenting on these processes of change, Rimisp's projects at the same time, seek ways in which they can be made more inclusive and pro-poor. This is a normative concern through which an institutional dimension enters into Rimisp's work – that is, there is a particular concern for institutional arrangements through which market integration can be managed so as to meet poverty reduction and democratization goals (as per Rimisp's value statement referred to earlier). The portfolio of more recent projects shows some of the institutions that have received special attention from Rimisp – social movements, municipal governments, and producer organizations. This is important because while Rimisp is interested in market deepening, it is also interested in the governance of market deepening processes.

Opting for a primary interest in market and local government geographies (as opposed to historical geographies and concepts of place) helps locate this body of work in longer standing analytical traditions. In particular, there are clear resonances between DTR and regional science (Isard, 1975), more specifically with the Urban Functions in Rural Development tradition that

was particularly influential in USAID approaches to rural and regional development in Latin America and elsewhere (Johnson, 1970; Bromley, 1983; Gore, 1984). At the same time this focus distances Rimisp from other traditions that have also emphasized notions of territory – in particular those associated with concepts of autochthonous development, development with identity or development from within.⁴¹

This position leads some observers to consider Rimisp to be as an institution with "more than a touch" of the neo-liberal to it – an institution that calls for a humanization of, and social justice in, current processes of transformation and market formation, but does not question the inherent desirability of appropriately governed market led transformation within Latin America. This observation takes various forms: that Rimisp adopts the concepts used by the multilateral agencies; that Rimisp (and DTR) take much of the conflict out of rural development; or that Rimisp is an institution influenced by the Chilean experience of agricultural and rural development. Some comment that at certain points, Rimisp works with approaches that while apparently having worked in Chile, are less appropriate for other political and economic contexts or that, at the very least, do not address the most urgent themes in contemporary dynamics of rural poverty and territorial change.

The fairness of these comments aside (see below), what is apparent is that Rimisp's generative concepts – as expressed through their current activities – address markets more than politics, production rather than social conflict, and institutional arrangements as opposed to relations of power. Rimisp's emphasis is quite deliberate and grounded in the observation that social democratic approaches to rural development have understated the importance of markets, profitability and the economic viability of development proposals, and have tended to understand rural development as a social policy instrument solely for the rural poor. The choice of language and core concerns allows Rimisp to interact more fluidly with multilaterals, bilateral aid agencies, and governments.

In conclusion, it would be more accurate to say that Rimisp's overall program draws on *analytical* traditions within both social democracy and neoliberalism, and in this sense is located within that family of projects that are broadly referred to as "Third Way" and post-Washington Consensus, and that seek a "renewal of social democracy" (Giddens, 1998) through deepening the discussion of markets within a social democratic view of rural development that sees an important role for governmental and public action. For this reason it is unsurprising that many commentators view Rimisp as an institution strongly influenced by the Chilean experience of rural and agricultural development (these have been important themes in this process), however, as noted earlier, these themes have a broader reach throughout Latin America.

⁴¹ It is the case that the Rimisp DTR document (Schejtman and Berdegué, 2003) refers to territories as "a space with identity." However, the reflection on the links between identity, space, place and development is not a strong point of the document, and the literature on autochthonous development, development with identity, the social construction of space and the like is not well represented in the bibliography. In this sense, the framework remains rooted in other traditions.

A research organization?

To what extent does the current portfolio of work make Rimisp a research organization? While internally there is a certain desire to think of itself as such (or as a form of think-tank), external commentators in Latin America are far less likely than those from international organizations to call Rimisp a research institute (Tables 4 and 5). Indeed, looked at historically it is better characterized as an organization that first aimed to support learning processes, and with time combined support to learning with support for research and a quite limited amount of in-house research. As much as anything this distribution of tasks is an artifact of funding and funder preferences and aversions. The principal demands emanating from funders (and the contract market) are for the implementation of programs and provision of services, and far less for research. With the odd exception, PI time that is funded under Rimisp's projects tends to cover salary costs for managing and facilitating systems that support learning and research but does not cover time for Rimisp to do much of its own research or writing. While time may be provided for synthesizing lessons emerging from projects, this is also limited and, in the opinion of a number of observers, some of the synthesis documents produced in Rimisp projects are somewhat disappointing. They are viewed as useful summaries rather than cutting edge contributions.

One area in which Rimisp has been more obviously a research player is represented by the tiered rectangles in the right hand corner of Figure 2. These reflect a body of work that has been cumulative and emergent over time, and in which the emphasis has been on *doing*, *convening*, *advising on* and *publishing* research. This trajectory – which began with the ERNA project, unfolded into the supermarkets work and is now presented as "Regoverning Markets" – has explored, in different ways, the changing role of markets in rural development. Until Regoverning Markets, this line of work was not funded by a single donor at the same level as Rimisp's other principal projects, it has however, has played a critical role in projecting Rimisp to an international audience (along with the DTR document).

Thus, while in Rimisp's statement of institutional purpose and intent, multidisciplinary, applied research is the first activity to be mentioned, this does not reflect the current balance of what Rimisp *itself* does. While it *supports*, *convenes* and *advises on* applied research done by others, some of which is multidisciplinary, in practice Rimisp *does* relatively little of this research. This is not *per se* a problem, or even a limitation. Indeed, its capacity to bring in resources and then redirect them on to others who do the research that Rimisp then advises and coordinates, is an asset in the donor market. It makes Rimisp attractive as a vehicle for channeling significant research support funding thus allowing donors to farm out some of their own research management to Rimisp.⁴²

In this sense, then, Rimisp is an organization that combines capacity building for research and learning, research management, and research, with a strong applied and policy oriented emphasis.

Table 4

⁴² The program *Territorios Rurales en Movimiento* seems to have attempted this.

What is Rimisp and what would you compare it with?

Respondent	What is Rimisp?	What would you compare it with?
1	Development NGO Research Institute	Grade, Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, Centro Bartolome de las Casas
2	Development NGO	No answer
3	Development NGO	IICA, Escuela de Etica y Economía
4	Foundation/Private Development Cooperation Agency	No answer
5	Development NGO Foundation/Private Development Cooperation Agency Consultancy organization	Catholic Relief Services
6	Development NGO Research Institute	Cebrap, Cedec, Solagral,
7	Foundation/Private Development Cooperation Agency	Tiempo 2000
8	Development NGO Research Institute Foundation/Private Development Cooperation Agency	No answer
9	Development NGO	No answer
10	Foundation/Private Development Cooperation Agency	IDDRI
11	Foundation/Private Development Cooperation Agency	Fundation pour le Progrès de l'Homme, Cepes, Grade, SAC

Summary of mentions:

Type of organization	Number of mentions
Development NGO	7
Foundation/Private Development Cooperation Agency	6
Research Institute	3
Consultancy Group	1

Source: survey answers, mostly from Latin American organizations

Table 5
What is Rimisp and what would you compare it with?

Respondent	What is Rimisp?	What would you compare it with
1	Consultancy group, using network resources	No answer
2	Network that does think-tank, consulting, and project initiation and	No answer

	management work	
3	Think-tank	IIED
4	Think-tank, consulting, and project management, with some staff more like those of a think-tank, others more like staff of different types of organization	IFPRI
5	Think-tank, consultancy	
6	Mostly think-tank and consulting group	It is unique
7	Consulting group	Resources for the Future
Others	No answer	

Source: email interview answers, mostly from international organizations

Projects or programs?

The apparent junior position of research and think-tank-like contributions within Rimisp is also reflected in the way in which work is organized. Whether presented in terms of Figures 1 and 2, or through Rimisp's website, it is also evident that the institution is organized around projects rather than programs. Once again this is partly an artifact of the normal practice within Rimisp of linking each PI to a large project.⁴³ Because individuals are so closely identified with particular projects, and donor funding is project based rather than programmatic or institutional, all the incentives line up to encourage this mode of organization. While it has clear advantages (more on this later), it also has corollary effects that – though unintentional – are perhaps less desirable. In particular, it conveys the impression that Rimisp operates more as a consultancy than a research institute or think-tank. At the very least it conveys a sense of an organization that responds to funding agency opportunities, rather than one that generates proposals for new work based on the way in which knowledge is accumulating within the organization. Certainly, the absence of programs can give the impression that there is no obvious structure within Rimisp through which learning occurs, and that activities are demand led rather than generated organically from within.

Once again, drawing such a conclusion would not be entirely fair. Interviews with Rimisp's main funding agencies make clear that projects have emerged at least as much from Rimisp as from the agencies and that in some cases one could reasonably argue that Rimisp has molded ideas and thinking within the agency to such a degree that when the agency expresses demands it does so in terms of Rimisp-inspired ideas. Put more simply, with several of its funding partners, Rimisp helps generate the demand for its own supply. Such dynamics, however, are opaque to most outsiders making it understandable that some critics have commented that Rimisp deals in donor agency idea. A more accurate reading of the situation might well be that agencies deal in ideas that Rimisp has co-fashioned with the donors.

⁴³ More than one PI participates in any given project. However, each project has a single PI as its coordinator, and this PI plays by far the most significant role within that project and is the project manager.

Although a desire to change public image may not *per se* be sufficient to justify a change in internal organization, there are other consequences of project based organization that also support reorganization. First, the fact that projects trump programs means that it is not always clear what Rimisp does, or what it stands for, or the specific debates in which it wants to locate its work. Second, the absence of programs may also lead to lost opportunities for synergy. At a minimum, such synergies would be logistical, but would also likely be intellectual and conceptual – mechanisms through which different projects may be able to contribute to each other's thinking (and so help produce *institutional* thinking).

The overarching issue here relates back to the observation that while Rimisp's rapid growth might have undermined coherence, it has not due to the sharing of core generative ideas. The implication is that while coherence has not been lost, more could be done to enhance and ensure coherence in the future and that furthermore this is vital if Rimisp wants to assume the role of research organization/think-tank. As currently structured it is not yet positioned to capitalize on its wide variety of activities as a basis for producing knowledge in ways that synthesize and analyze across projects and across scales of engagement in Latin America as fully as it might. Nor does the structure make clear how it accumulates knowledge in particular thematic and policy domains.⁴⁴

Section 2: Rimisp's products: quality, relevance and impacts

With this wide array of activities, what does Rimisp produce, for whom are those products relevant, and what are their impacts? Before engaging in this reflection it is worth distinguishing at least two levels of products: products produced within, and in large measure by, Rimisp projects; and the products of Rimisp as an institution that in some way exceed the limits of its projects and reflect an institutional contribution, based on inherent institutional capacities and/or synergies among its activities. The distinction is important because it demands more careful reflection on the difference between Rimisp and its projects, or between Rimisp and a particular PI (differences that are not always apparent to *socios* operating within any one of these projects).

Project specific products: quality, relevance and impacts

The quality, relevance and perceived impacts of the products of Rimisp's specific projects are in one sense apparent from the evolution of the projects themselves. Let us consider several examples.

FIDAMERICA. The fact that FIDAMERICA is entering its fourth phase suggests that IFAD – and evaluators of prior phases of FIDAMERICA – have deemed the work conducted under

⁴⁴ A visit to Rimisp's website, for instance, takes one to projects rather than thematic areas and does not easily help the visitor learn and review Rimisp's cumulated knowledge and products on, say, DTR, learning networks, markets, rural poverty and so on.

FIDAMERICA as high quality and highly relevant for IFAD and its projects in Latin America. In the words of IFAD officials, the relationship with Rimisp in FIDAMERICA "was fantastic ...it helped us a great deal." That an IFAD technical assistance grant enters into a fourth phase is "unheard of" in IFAD, and reflects their satisfaction with what FIDAMERICA has delivered. Indeed, within IFAD, FIDAMERICA has become a reference point for other regions in how to link IFAD projects, promote organizational learning, and better link IFAD-Rome with the field.

These appreciations were more or less echoed by the external evaluator of FIDAMERICA's third phase who concluded that:

"RIMISP ... executed the program in a manner that showed highly satisfactory technical and administrative quality, reflecting its experience in the management of knowledge networks, its involvement in rural poverty reduction, its internal organization, its administrative capacity and its economic and financial solvency" (Piña, 2005)

This same evaluation went on to itemize some of the effects of the program at distinct phases. In addition to the support it first gave to IFAD projects by installing and using information technology, during its second phase it helped develop human resources within these projects, fostered communication and exchange among projects, elaborated a series of electronic resources (listserves, websites etc.) and more generally projected a positive image of IFAD as an innovative actor in Latin American rural development. In its third phase similar effects were found by the evaluation. Through supporting the systematization of eighty-four distinct project experiences, a series of e-conferences, meetings and conferences, and active web and listserve maintenance, FIDAMERICA was deemed to have helped IFAD projects establish their own learning systems, communicate among themselves and with non-IFAD actors, and gain access to new concepts and methods. It also helped to establish a network of rural economic organizations concerned with enhanced market access (Piña, 2005). These positive appreciations were also supported by IFAD project directors who participated in the evaluation. In their different ways each felt FIDAMERICA had helped their projects become better learning organizations and also helped link the projects (or at least these Directors) to a broader intellectual community and set of concepts and ideas concerned with Latin American rural development – "it's an institution that has brought us, without our realizing it, closer to knowledge."⁴⁵

This said, across these interviews there was also a real sense that FIDAMERICA has been most relevant for the technical staff in the rural development projects that IFAD supports in the region (as well as the technical staff of non-IFAD projects who participate in its e-conferences). It has had less relevance and impact among peasant and indigenous organizations in the region and both FIDAMERICA and Rimisp are perceived as being distant from social movements.

Grupo Chorlavi. Quite similar observations might be made about the Grupo Chorlavi/Fondo Minka de Chorlavi, Rimisp's other long-standing project. Depending on how phases are counted, Grupo Chorlavi is also in its third phase with both ICCO and IDRC; and, at least informally,

⁴⁵ It is worth noting, though, that more than one well-informed though not directly interested interviewee felt that FIDAMERICA had fallen into a pattern of supporting and conducting systematizations for the sake of doing so, and that these systematizations did not necessarily have much effect on the ways in which projects operated.

ICCO has already declared its interest in continuing to a fourth phase. The implication is that for these two donors, the program has been relevant, allowing them access to local organizations and allowing them to pursue and meet (at least to a level of satisfaction sufficient to justify project renewal) their goals of building capacities and promoting learning. Again, as with IFAD, these donors – ICCO in particular – use Chorlaví internally as a model of how a learning network oriented to capacity building ought to and can function.

Chorlaví's products are also very similar to those of FIDAMERICA: e-conferences, systematizations and an active website. The principal difference is that the participants are not ICCO or IDRC funded projects (even if at an initial stage this perhaps had been the idea, at least for ICCO), but instead civil society organizations, research centers and local governmental actors working in rural development (understood broadly). The review/systematization of Chorlaví identified different levels at which the program had had effects – ranging from those limited to the level of individual participants, through to stimulating conceptual and methodological innovation and new approaches to project design within organizations (Escobar et al., 2006: 53-5). Furthermore, participating organizations themselves identify such changes as partially due to their participation in Chorlaví. On the other hand, Chorlaví has had far less influence in policy formation or in the generation of knowledge that "moves the frontiers of rural development" (Escobar et al., 2006:55).

Finally – and without wanting to overdo the comparison with FIDAMERICA – there are also similarities in relation to the question of who Chorlaví is *less* relevant to. Both the e-conferences and in particular the competitively funded systematizations have had low levels of participation from producer and campesino organizations. This document is not in a position to ascertain whether this reflects sheer lack of relevance to these actors, their lack of access to information technology and information on the program or other factors. What is clear though is that this is a program whose products, like those of FIDAMERICA, so have not yet been firmly embedded in this sector of rural society.

Chorlaví has also proven to be less relevant to one of its founding parents, ALOP. There are many reasons for this, not all necessarily negative nor the responsibility of Chorlaví. ALOP members are – except in the Andean region – not particularly strong on rural issues, and the rural question is not particularly prominent within current ALOP strategy (though it is certainly present). Also, it is likely the case that the funds that Chorlaví makes available are too modest to be of much interest to the associates of ALOP, that tend to be larger NGOs. However, what also may be the case (suggested in interviews) is that some of the ways in which Chorlaví (and Rimisp) frame rural development questions are unconvincing to ALOP members who are perhaps more likely to identify the main problems for rural development in the political and international spheres, rather than in the local territorial sphere or in processes of market deepening and local institutional change.

Regoverning markets The program entitled "Regoverning Markets" is harder to characterize. It is not a single project, but rather an area of work that reflects an evolution of thinking supported through a series of projects over time. The characterization is even more slippery because while Regoverning Markets is the formal name for a particular research program through which this

area of work is funded, it is also the label Rimisp uses to group its own activities related to food chains.⁴⁶

This area of work has primarily a research purpose – to explore the effects of increasing concentration in food chains and the ways in which producers and their economic organizations might better negotiate positions within these chains to enhance their inclusion in these markets. It is an area of work for which Rimisp has become well known – and along with DTR, the "supermarkets work" as it is commonly referred to by observers, was identified as one of Rimisp's main substantive contributions to global debates. Indeed Rimisp (along with their collaborator, Tom Reardon at Michigan State University) are credited by some with having picked up on the significance of food chain concentration well before many others around the world. One effect of this is that the program that now serves as the primary source of funding for the work – a research agreement with five institutions and donors – is in part a creation of Rimisp, and the other partners sought out Rimisp as much as Rimisp sought them. In its current form, the program is managed (and was designed) by a consortium of five organizations (IIED, NRI, KIT, MSU, Rimisp) who in turn work with some fifteen other groups around the world to implement activities. Rimisp was one of the founding *socios* of the first scoping phase of this program, and Rimisp's prior work played an important role in designing that phase. Likewise the work conducted by Rimisp-MSU within the first phase helped pilot methodological protocols that were then used in the (larger) second phase. This is perhaps the one area in which Rimisp(-MSU) research can legitimately be credited with having pushed a frontier of knowledge and in so doing has helped open up an area for public and policy debate. The work has been taken up by the international press (New York Times) as well as donors and other observers.

At a more specific level, and in its current phase, the program has focused on delivering studies on particular food chains, primarily in Central America and Mexico (with earlier work in Chile and elsewhere in Latin America),⁴⁷ and in developing studies of small farmers' successful engagement with dynamic markets (this latter has a global, not only Latin American, reach). While as to be expected, the quality of the different studies varies, in general the research has contributed to country level discussions vis à vis food chain policy/politics as well as being of direct relevance for those involved in the governance of food chains. For instance, the research conducted by Rimisp (under contract to MSU) in Michoacan, Mexico, proved to be of direct use to the Agricultural Marketing Department of the Ministry of Agricultural Development of the State Government. Staff from the department comment that the research has helped them not only understand the food systems in which they intervene, but also to better target support to producers and their organizations so that they are able to negotiate more space in dealings with supermarkets. It has helped target public support on post-harvest management and value aggregation, as well as think through state level programs aimed at strengthening Michoacan's comparative advantages in certain chains. In the words of the administrators of the Marketing Department "we believe that these types of study are very valuable for the government and even

⁴⁶ Thus Rimisp's own Regoverning Markets program combines work that is or has been funded by MSU/USAID, DfID-WB, Oxfam International, Oxfam UK and the Ministry of Agriculture in Chile, as well as a global program of research that itself is also called Regoverning Markets, and managed by five organizations, including Rimisp.

⁴⁷ Rimisp implemented the Chilean part of the research.

more for producers, indeed we want to have the final version in order to disseminate among producer organizations."

TREM. While it is too soon to comment much on the Program on Social Movements and DTR (TREM) - it has yet to deliver final products – several important observations can be made. First, TREM had the potential to be relevant to two audiences that have typically been less interested in other Rimisp products: non-economic social science academics working on rural development, and particularly the politics of rural development; and social movements (and those working closely with social movements) who by definition understand rural development as a political problem. This was an important opportunity for Rimisp, while at the same time being a risky one – for it took both Rimisp and IDRC (their principal donor) into analytical and political territory in which they were less familiar.

For these reasons, TREM was from the outset, destined to be a challenging project for Rimisp. Two factors from within Rimisp made it even more challenging. First, while TREM was intended to be a serious research experience, to a certain degree Rimisp managed it in a way that might be thought of as an expanded version of the Chorlaví model. Grants were only two to two and half times the size of a Chorlaví systematization, and allowed research over a similar period (ten months). Also, a series of requirements were made of grantees (methodological, substantive and administrative) that increased the transaction costs involved in doing the research, making claims on already scarce time. Second, the PI coordinating the project was increasingly subject to other demands on his time,⁴⁸ which led to growing concerns in both Rimisp and IDRC that the project was not going to keep to its time line. This ultimately led the PI to withdraw as competing pressures on his time become excessive, and another PI was hired. This handover was not immediate, however, meaning that by project end, TREM had had four people assuming positions of coordination.

Given all this it is unsurprising that TREM was ultimately disappointing for both Rimisp and IDRC alike. The decision to submit research findings to an international development studies journal will ultimately demonstrate whether the work was of an internationally competitive quality or not. More importantly however, will be how far Rimisp and IDRC reflect on why these problems emerged. The tendency is to explain the problems in terms of personalities and workloads, however it may also be the case that neither of these two organizations found themselves *ultimately* able to manage a research support program entering areas that were relatively new to each of them and with which some staff in both institutions felt slightly uncomfortable. Doubly unfortunate is the very real possibility that, having opened a body of work through which Rimisp might have become relevant to (and learn from) new and distinct audiences, the conclusion that this was merely a "B/B+" project will lead both Rimisp and IDRC to reorient the program before it is able to establish significant ties with these new audiences.

Argentina Rural. That RIMISP was asked by IFAD and the IDB⁴⁹ to implement a consultancy aimed at elaborating a national rural development strategy for Argentina reflected both multilaterals' interpretation of the quality and competitiveness of Rimisp thinking on rural

⁴⁸ He was supporting, and then leading, the Free Trade Agreement negotiations between Ecuador and the USA.

⁴⁹ The government of Argentina was informed of the choice and did not object.

development, as well as the sense that for IFAD Rimisp "is a strategic partner". In practice, however, the experience has been less successful than that of FIDAMERICA for reasons related both to dynamics within Argentina, as well as within Rimisp.

For Rimisp, Argentina Rural offered an opportunity to ground DTR in a national strategy. In a sense, then, the anticipated product here was intended to be a grounded operationalization of DTR. Like TREM, it also offered the chance to open up a relatively new area for Rimisp: prior to this, Rimisp had worked relatively little at the level of national governments having instead oriented itself more to local and international actors.

The process pursued to develop the national strategy has generated a series of intermediary products, in particular systematizations of rural development in twelve localities, in addition to a series of thematic studies. It seems generally accepted that the quality of these studies varies considerably, although an informal internal review of quality conducted within IFAD qualified these products as "good to very good." Interviews suggest that some were also useful for local authorities in clarifying their own thinking on and strategies for rural development.

Argentina Rural was, however, more than a technical exercise. It was also a socio-political exercise in which it was necessary to form a collectivity of interest and meeting of minds around the core themes for a national strategy, and the main issues that needed to be addressed. In this sense, the project was far less successful. Many of the problems in this regard were related to socio-political dynamics within Argentina that were beyond the control of Rimisp. Others, however, were more within Rimisp's potential sphere of influence. The general sense in this experience was that Rimisp was not sufficiently present within Argentina (at least not to the level that many of the main actors had anticipated) during the course of preparing the strategy and that this lack of presence prevented it from managing the socio-political exercise referred to above. This became particularly apparent in the latter stages of the process, when the PI on this project became involved in a separate, new research collaboration that Rimisp was beginning with the London School of Economics and Political Science. Whether this relative absence meant that Rimisp did not pick up on tensions as quickly as it may otherwise have done is less important than the perceptions it led to not only among governmental and non-governmental actors in Argentina but also among its principal *socios*.

The pressure of work on Rimisp, and the very tight timetable defined by the contract with IFAD, led to the delivery of a first draft synthesis paper that disappointed many readers. This left Rimisp more vulnerable to criticisms by observers that even if motivated by concerns that were not only technical, were able to use the report as an axis around which to organize criticism. The informal internal IFAD review of quality referred to above also found this draft to be deficient, with a general sense that it was not related to the local systematizations and thematic papers and that it could have been written without much of the background work ever having been done. It read like a paper that was over-determined by the concept of DTR, prepared by Rimisp alone, without significant input from its *socios* in Argentina, and that gave too little space to adapting the concept of DTR to local circumstances. Subsequent drafts were deemed to be an improvement, and the final version received very positive praise, but by then some of the damage both to Rimisp's reputation (in some circles) and to the strategy preparation process had been done. At this stage, it is far from clear whether or not the products will have a great effect on the national

rural development strategy due to these process issues. There is also a sense that some of the actors involved in the process would be hesitant to return to Rimisp for further work in Argentina.

Chile rural.⁵⁰ Rimisp does not have a single, large, multi-year Chilean project but rather a portfolio of shorter term contracts combining evaluation and strategy preparation. As in Argentina, but on a far smaller scale, part of this work has involved exploring the relevance of DTR as a concept for thinking about rural development planning. This work has been conducted at the request both of the Ministry of Planning (Mideplan), and of two regional governments. In each instance, the client went to Rimisp because of prior contacts and a feeling that Rimisp was a leader in thinking about DTR and would deliver high quality products. This expectation was satisfied for Mideplan, but only partially in the Eighth Region.

The experience of the Bio Bio Region is relevant here because in some ways it resonates with that of Argentina. While things did not go as seriously wrong in Chile, at a certain point local actors in the regional government began to complain that Rimisp had not been sufficiently present in the process of conducting the work and that the bulk of the work was being done by the local partner (Agraria-Sur). There was also a complaint that while the regional government had anticipated the participation of several Rimisp PIs in the work, in the end only one participated, and even then not fully (ironically the feeling in Concepción was that the other PIs had been drawn away by the demands of Argentina Rural).

Rimisp was able to respond to these concerns, and worked fully and collaboratively (with Agraria Sur) in the preparation of the final report – a report with which the regional government was relatively happy (certainly happy enough to return to Rimisp in the future). However, there was also a feeling among clients that the product was not as good as it could have been, and that in some sense they had been let down: "there was insufficient dedication to the work."⁵¹ The work did not deliver some of the comparisons between DTR in the Bio Bio and other international experiences that the regional government team had hoped for. In addition, the regional government staff also felt that it compromised methodology as interviews were conducted in ways that were uneven and so difficult to compare. Finally, the fact that most work was done by Agraria Sur meant that the work lost the intended "external" character.

Institutional products: quality, relevance and effects

While the distinction between project specific and institutional products and effects might seem slightly artificial, a difference is necessary if we are to reflect on an institution existing separately from its specific activities (projects). Furthermore, the presumption is that such institutional products are what attracts clients/funders to Rimisp prior to the formalization of a project. What then are these institutional products and what effects have they had? We identify four distinct categories of product: while they are all knowledge based (making Rimisp very much a knowledge institution), they reflect different types of knowledge.

⁵⁰ This is my name for of this area of work.

⁵¹ "Faltó mayor dedicación al trabajo."

Methodologies

The first category of product reflects a continuation of the product domain that first defined Rimisp: the elaboration and provision of methodologies. Rimisp-1 focused on the elaboration of methodologies for farming systems management, research and analysis. This was a period of methodological innovation and training that those associated with that period of Rimisp still value highly, and whose decline in Rimisp's portfolio of activities is lamented. Rimisp-2 sustained an interest in methodologies, but of different sorts. Two in particular stand out, and reflect an interaction between individual projects and Rimisp as an emerging institution trying to identify niches in which it might be competitive. These are: methodologies for the systematization of rural development experiences; and impact assessment and evaluation methodologies in areas broadly related to natural resource management and agricultural/rural development.

Systematization methodologies occupy an important place in FIDAMERICA and Chorlaví, but are also drawn on in other of Rimisp's projects. In this sense the on-going elaboration of these methodologies exists beyond any individual project and reflects a collective institutional product. It is one that is valued by many *socios*. The elaboration of evaluation methodologies began in earnest with the first project that Rimisp implemented on re-opening its relationship with IDRC that culminated in an edited book (Berdegue and Escobar, 2000). While this body of methodological knowledge has been less present in Rimisp's main projects it has been important in helping it win contracts for large scale rural sector evaluations in Chile.

Again, the fact that such contracts have been won, and that donors and *socios* come to Rimisp for systematization support, suggests the relevance and quality of these products. Likewise, Rimisp's sustained success in winning relatively large scale evaluation contracts from different parts of the Chilean government⁵² suggest the high quality of the methodological protocols that it has developed. That said, a study of this nature cannot determine the final effects of these methodologies on the subsequent practices of the Chilean government.

Systems

Probably Rimisp's most important product has been the elaboration of systems for the conception, preparation, implementation and synthesis of complex projects with a strong learning network component and the involvement of multiple actors of different types. While each initiative follows a slightly different route, there is a certain Rimisp-way of doing such projects. This begins with project conception, consultations and meetings with close *socios* to elaborate the basis of a project document, presentation of the project, creation of some sort of advisory group, formation of a network of players in which the core learning within a project (or component of a project) will occur, implementation of activities to foster that learning (typically e-conferences,

⁵² These include evaluations of: the Forestry Subsidy (2005); the degraded soils program (2001, 2006); the livestock subsidy program (2004); Indap's financial services program; the territorial management process in Bio Bio (2005); and others.

real time conferences, competitive funds and systematizations) and then some sort of closing event and written document. The learning that has occurred within Rimisp means that PIs and, critically, administrative staff, have got the implementation of such activities down to a relatively fine art, meaning that for donors, good quality and cost efficient implementation are relatively assured.

It is quite clear that what donors value most in Rimisp – indeed, what they *buy* from Rimisp when entering into a contract with them – are these systems. They guarantee service quality and the satisfaction of project goals. "It's a good project executor" noted one donor; also positively, but with the caveat implied, another said: "Rimisp is becoming a project management unit – [it] has developed common systems to deal with being so stretched." And another: "They can pretty much guarantee quality."

Again, the revealed preference of donors demonstrates the relevance to them of Rimisp's project management systems. More than this, though, donors are quite clear that in this domain Rimisp is not simply competitive but is a market leader. Similarly, the fact that few *socios* ever make particularly vocal complaints about these systems for project implementation also suggests their relevance to this broader set of actors. The relevance of these systems to producer and campesino organizations, and base groups is however, less clear, not least because the systems hinge around the use of IT which is still not a part of everyday life for many such organizations despite having email addresses. This has, indeed, been a theme in evaluations and internal discussions within Fidamerica, Chorlaví and Rimisp more generally, and in response to this recognition these and other Rimisp projects have subsequently introduced more face-to-face (and less electronic) exchange and learning mechanisms for such organizations.⁵³

Overall, it seems clear that donors working with Rimisp consider the work to be a purchase of services and not an investment in Rimisp as such. Put another way, while Rimisp implements projects that aim to build capacities in others, nobody supports capacity building within Rimisp. The very quality of the systems that Rimisp has developed are its worse enemy in this regard.

Substantive intellectual products

Third, Rimisp has delivered a number of intellectual products that – more than being methodological – present substantive knowledge on particular topics. In particular, it has contributed to knowledge on: poverty-environment linkages, non-agricultural rural employment, supermarket chains and territorially based rural development. In most of these cases the knowledge produced has grown out of projects, though Rimisp *qua institution* chose to go an additional step and rework this knowledge in a way that would make it more accessible to an international audience. It has done this by dedicating the time to translate the knowledge into the English language for submission to international development studies journals – in particular, *World Development* and *Development Policy Review*.

⁵³ These face-to-face mechanisms include exchanges, learning trips/study visits and the like.

The nature and quality of this intellectual production varies, and appreciation of the contributions depend on who is commenting. The same person who categorically referred to Rimisp as a "regional asset" (see below) equally firmly insisted that Rimisp had made "no contribution to knowledge per se."⁵⁴ Others are less categorical, though do suggest that Rimisp's primary contribution has been to synthesize existing knowledge, add some of their own insights to it, and make it understandable and accessible within the Latin American context. This comment is made especially regarding its work on territorially based rural development. Though Schejtman and Berdegú (2003) is possibly Rimisp's most cited grey material publication both in the region and among international development actors, the publication is viewed by others as a very good synthesis written in a particularly persuasive style more than as an original contribution. Again, however, this depends on who is commenting – for those less steeped in debates on industrial clusters, local development, regional science and the like, the document is deemed to be far more original.

Indeed, regional synthesis in particular knowledge domains is perhaps Rimisp's greatest contribution. One interviewee commented on how Rimisp "has this vocation for regional synthesis", and another "here you have a voice that synthesizes knowledge." This is doubly important. Not only does it make knowledge available within the region, it also projects Latin American debates on rural development to an international audience that is too often ignorant of Latin America and/or considers the Latin American experience to be too different from that of Africa and Asia to be of much relevance.

Table 6: Social Science Citation Index counts of articles co-authored by Rimisp staff and deriving from Rimisp research

Article	Journal reference	Number of citations
Reardon, T., C. P. Timmer, C. B. Barret and J.A. Berdegú. 2003. The rise of supermarkets in Africa, Asia and Latin America.	American Journal of Agricultural Economics 85(5): 1140-1146.	15
Swinton, S. M., G. Escobar, and T. Reardon. 2003. Poverty and Environment in Latin America: Concepts, Evidence and Policy Implications.	World Development 31(11):1865-1872	3
Loevinsohn, M.E., Berdegú, J.A. and Guijt, I. 2002. Deepening the basis of rural resource management: learning processes and decision support.	Agricultural Systems, Vol. 73 (1): 3-22	3
Reardon, T., J. A. Berdegú, and G. Escobar. 2001. Rural Nonfarm Employment and Incomes In Latin America: Overview and Policy Implications.	World Development Vol. 29 (3): 395-409	26
Berdegú J.A., E. Ramírez, T. Reardon, and G. Escobar. 2001. Rural Nonfarm Employment and Incomes in Chile.	World Development Vol. 29 (3): 411-425	3

⁵⁴ This is not a casual quotation – the commentator is significant.

The international quality of this work is best measured by the frequency with which it is referred to in grey material (e.g. the DTR work) and, when it has been published in development studies journals (such as *World Development*), by the fact that it has passed the peer review process with a relatively high rejection rate. Another measure is the extent to which this work is cited in articles produced in other Social Science Citation Index journals. A count of these citations in July 2006 revealed the following numbers:⁵⁵

These citation levels, though not dramatic, are certainly respectable. The count also makes clear that on an international stage, the articles that are most widely cited are those that synthesize the overall findings of Rimisp funded projects, again pointing to the important place of synthesis in what Rimisp produces. Note also that the articles are all multi-authored, and mostly with US or European based lead authors raising the question as to how far they are ultimately associated with, or the work of Rimisp.

On the other hand, these types of collaboration demonstrate the linking role that Rimisp PIs have played, connecting rural development debates in parts of the US and Europe, with Latin America. This is an important role, but is not necessarily sufficient to qualify Rimisp as a research centre or think-tank – at least *not yet*. To qualify for such a label would require more original research and intellectual contribution, and indeed a stronger research capacity within Rimisp. Yet here there is perhaps a larger issue. Several interviewees – in particular researchers – suggested that hardly any centers (indeed, perhaps no centers) in Latin America are generating original ideas on rural development. The primary sources for these ideas are viewed as being the World Bank, followed by the IDB perhaps, along with certain Northern (primarily US) academics. In this reading, the role played by Latin American rural development researchers has been primarily one of reworking and adapting these ideas, and then propagating the adapted ideas. To the extent that this is the case, Rimisp still plays a leading role in this regional process of intellectual adaptation. But Rimisp's contribution appears to go beyond this. At least in the case of some of the donors (especially the IDB) that are viewed as a source of formative ideas in the region, there is evidence to suggest that Rimisp has played a role in forming these very ideas. In the case of the IDB, for instance, when Rimisp was asked to prepare the IDB's rural development strategy, "Rimisp participated (presenting papers with new ideas) at several technical workshops preceding Annual Meetings of the IDB and had a great impact ... and that's one of the best windows to really change development paradigms in the region." Funded by IDRC, Rimisp also prepared and ran an e-consultation on the future rural development strategy of IDB. According to a senior IDB observer, Rimisp "produced the best summary of such huge list of messages that I have ever seen. Then the summary became almost as the 0 draft for new (current) IDB strategy." The observer goes on to say: "That's impact."

In a similar vein, during the course of the evaluation Rimisp was asked to prepare the rural development chapter for the World Development Report of 2008, which will deal with "Agriculture and Development." Invitations such as these, plus the comments in the previous

⁵⁵ Note the table excludes publications cited only once or twice; and also excludes citations in publications (e.g. books, certain lower ranked journals) that are not registered in the SSCI database.

paragraph, complicate the distinction between external agency thinking and Rimisp thinking.⁵⁶ Similar hybridizations have occurred in IFAD. In this sense, Rimisp's institutional knowledge is relevant, competitive and has had policy impact – it is simply that the hybridization processes through which this occurs reduce the visibility of such impacts. Time will tell whether something similar ultimately happens in Argentinean rural policy thinking as a result of Argentina Rural, or in Chilean policy thinking as a result of the recent request from the Minister of Planning in Chile for Rimisp to help the Ministry assess rural well-being in order to be able to better target social protection programs.

Brand and model

A further product and contribution of Rimisp – an unintended though very valuable outcome – is the elaboration of the model by which it is organized and functions. In a period wherein research funding is scarce, and institutional funding for research oriented organizations even scarcer, a number of similar organizations look to Rimisp to see how they are able not only to survive but to occupy such a regionally visible role and sustain a high level of productivity. One commented: "we have looked ... to see how Rimisp do it" and view them not only as "a peer, but as a reference point." Other research organizations with an interest in playing a more regional role are also attracted and intrigued by the Rimisp model. From the interviews, it is unclear whether or not these observers are unaware of the costs and vulnerabilities involved in the model (see Section 3), but irregardless, Rimisp has offered other knowledge centers a model from which to learn.

While offering peer organizations a relevant model for organizing knowledge generation, the fact that it assumes a regional role means it is recognized as making contributions that other such centers do not: "Rimisp is a regional asset." It has helped to synthesize regional experiences that others do not and has linked people and centers that might otherwise not have been linked. Thus one commentator in Peru remarked that while in one sense Rimisp plays a very similar role to GRADE, IEP or CEPES, it also plays "a role in promoting a collective regional memory," a role made possible by its regional identity, resources, "capacidad de interlocución" and "capital relacional." Furthermore, it has also helped connect centers in the region to centers and thinkers beyond the region, playing a international linking role ("institución bisagra") that others do not. Furthermore, it is deemed – by all people interviewed – as working in a way that is internationally (throughout Latin America) competitive. Interviewees regard Rimisp as more flexible, more dynamic, less expensive and less political than the other comparable regional organizations, most of whom have some form of government or inter-governmental link, such as IICA, Cepal or Flacso. The effects of the Rimisp model are more obvious at the level of policy and applied academic debate as opposed to the material level of poverty. The model is seen as helping support discussions and exchanges that might otherwise not have occurred, and facilitating high quality debate.

These different components of the model constitute and are simultaneously supported by, what can be referred to as the Rimisp brand. In one particularly effusive interview, a person from

⁵⁶ Further complicating these distinctions is the fact that in each instance these contributions have been financially assisted by IDRC.

another research organization characterized elements of this brand: "efficient ... they are totally honest they never invite you to a meeting to rob your ideas always very transparent in collaborations...they guarantee you quality." Another commented that Rimisp staff are "very capable, intelligent, honest."

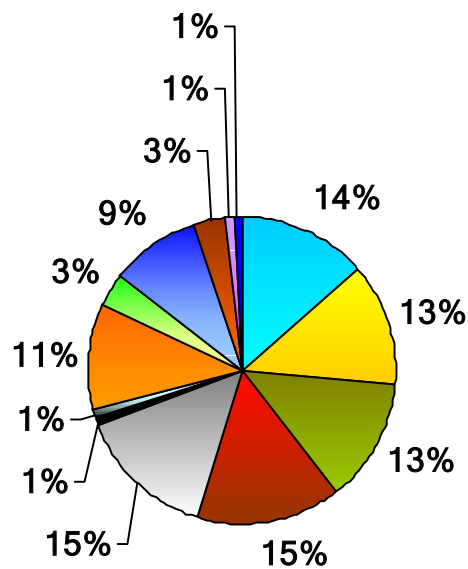
This brand – coupled with several Rimisp products – are absolutely central to the organisation's survival, and to its potential impact. Yet, as noted above, the integrity of this brand was called into question in 2005 in three separate projects. The following section therefore discusses the internal conditions that have both made this model possible and also challenged its sustainability.

Section 3: The Rimisp model: administrative, socio-cultural and financial aspects of sustainability

Section 2 argued that one of the contributions that Rimisp has made to rural development in Latin America has been the elaboration of its institutional model. This model is not only what makes Rimisp an attractive partner (to both funders and *socios*) but also serves as a reference point for other research based non-profits in the region. This section discusses the elements of this model that seem most relevant to explain both Rimisp's effects and its sustainability as an actor. It explores both strengths and weaknesses, and focuses on four elements of the model: social capital, the relationships between Rimisp's organizational agency and that of its *socios*, organizational culture (which is closely related), and administrative and financial practices.

Social capital as an institutional asset

Rimisp is a social capital dense institution. The extent of its relationships leap from its website and are among the interesting features that attract funding agencies. The website notes more than one hundred *socios*, though this already understates the established relationships upon which Rimisp may draw at any one point in time as it does not include the relationships established through FIDAMERICA for example, or each funding round of the Grupo Chorlaví. The relationships are primarily with Latin American organizations, though also include a good number of international contacts (in the USA and Europe, in particular). While these relationships (Figure 4) tend to be concentrated in NGOs of various types (40% of *socios*), there are also a healthy number of relationships with academic organizations (15%), government (17%), and various types of donor organizations (15%). There are fewer relationships with grassroots organizations (11%), and those in place are almost entirely with producer organizations (as opposed to social movements).



- Development NGO, foundation or institute
- Research/applied research NGO, foundation or institute
- Research and development NGO, foundation or institute
- University or University department
- National government
- Municipal government
- Provincial, regional or state government
- First order rural organization
- Bilateral development organization
- Multilateral development organization
- Private foundations and development cooperation agencies
- Consulting companies
- Other

This density emerges in large measure from Rimisp's origins as a network, and secondly from the centrality of learning networks as one of Rimisp's generative concepts. While some observers consider Rimisp to be part network, part something else (see Section 2 above), it seems more accurate to think of Rimisp as a small hub that supports and most importantly works through, networks. A perhaps even more acute description would be that Rimisp implements many of its *projects* through networks (as discussed above) but *as an organization* it works through its social capital, understood as a composite of non-formal ties imbued with a measure of trust and mutual accountability. Thus, while "the strength of [Rimisp's] weak ties" (Granovetter, 1985) is vital for the success of each round of Chorlaví, for Rimisp's conferences, for some of its sub-contracted papers and for its electronic conferences, as an organization Rimisp operates through its "strong ties." These strong ties are with individuals rather than organizations, and are characterized by trust, friendship and professional respect. These ties lead Rimisp to go out of its way for some of these *socios* (with financial implications – see below), but also lead *socios* to go 'that extra mile' for Rimisp. In this sense, there is probably a sort of group subsidy to Rimisp nourished by this form of social capital as well as by a sense that Rimisp is itself a project of a somewhat broader collective. That is, there is a sense within this "strongly tied" group both that Rimisp is a regional asset from whose existence many benefit and whose progress they therefore want to support, *and* that it is part of a broader intellectual and political project of which they are a part and that seeks to modernize (without losing all the critical edge of) a more deeply rooted social democratic reading of what rural development is and could be in Latin America.

In addition, Rimisp's social capital is also likely a result of its financial model – a model in which a large part of the resources raised by Rimisp pass through and on to other organizations and individuals. In this sense it is not accidental that a number of respondents characterized Rimisp as a foundation or development cooperation body – as it does indeed finance a lot of work done by others outside Rimisp. This practice of raising resources and then passing them on to others has a triple effect. It creates an image of an organization that does not want to keep all its resources to itself, an image that inspires confidence and confers credibility. Second it serves as an initial, and then recurrent incentive to others to participate in Rimisp coordinated activities and to be drawn into the Rimisp network (and in that process develops weak ties). And third, for some people, over the course of time it creates relationships of such recurrence and depth that the link ceases to be one sustained by resource flows and instead becomes one sustained by the trust that derives from repeated interactions (which in the process develop strong ties).

The boundary between the strongly tied and weakly tied group is not, however, always clear – even to one or another PI. Though not necessarily a major issue, it was referred to by some as a "boundary problem" in which the management of boundaries was not always clear, and so could at times lead to misunderstandings or exaggerated expectations.

Who is the agent? Rimisp and its socios

Agency and research: a research organization or a learning network?

Earlier the document discussed the extent to which Rimisp is a research organization – primarily with a view to reflecting on the place of research vis-à-vis learning, capacity building and other functions within the portfolio of activities that Rimisp's core team assume. That discussion, however, also began to open up a reflection on how far Rimisp is really an *organization*, as defined by the "What is Rimisp" and "Rimisp personnel" buttons on its website. Those buttons define Rimisp as a group of identifiable people who constitute an organization that then works "in close relation to individuals and organizations, both public and private, national and international, at the scale of Latin America and the Caribbean".⁵⁷ But the discussion in the preceding section begins to question this definition. To the extent that other actors partly view Rimisp as a collective project, in which non-employees are also involved – then Rimisp is more than this core formal organization. Furthermore, the website self-presentation notwithstanding, some within the organization view Rimisp as more than just the core staff. This complicates a reflection on who is really acting when research is done with resources that flow through Rimisp. Who is doing the research when a study is financed within a program that Rimisp manages and is implemented by (for example) the University of Manchester and Cepes-Peru. Do just Manchester and Cepes do the research, or is the study also a research product of Rimisp?

This is a delicate, and potentially thorny discussion and is partly bound up with the issue of boundary management referred to above. The thorny part of the discussion we leave to one side, in order to take up a more general reflection – namely that, although Rimisp may no longer *formally* be a network, when it conducts research it still operates *as if* it is a network (or bundle of networks) made up of both strongly and weakly tied individuals and organizations. In this sense, *learning network* is not only a generative concept for Rimisp, but also a way of being.

Such a way of being and working is an asset (as noted earlier) as it mobilizes more resources than those that exist within the organization, and broadens the number of actors involved in disseminating products. However, it is not without complications for Rimisp. On the one hand if the desire is that research products produced this way are viewed as Rimisp products the organization confronts the problem of identifying with projects over whose quality it does not have complete control. On the other hand, if it over-identifies with the products or aims to exert more control over quality, it might begin to contravene some of the relationship qualities that generate so much good will. To turn the relationship into a consulting contract (which formally might give Rimisp more ownership and control) would probably weaken the quality of the product. But to keep it as a research funding relationship pushes Rimisp somewhat into the background. This is perhaps exacerbated to the extent that Rimisp aims to manage some of this quality problem by working with high quality partners who, by definition, already have their own established reputations and visibility.

⁵⁷ "en estrecha relación con individuos y organizaciones, públicas y privadas, nacionales e internacionales, a escala de América Latina y el Caribe" – accessed from Rimisp's website, July 12, 2006.

As we have noted, one potentially exciting asset from this position – of research convenor, facilitator, manager and advisor within a wider research network – is the possibility for synthesis that is created. That is, the position that Rimisp the organization occupies within Rimisp the research network is one that allows for real value added in synthesizing the research done within the network as a whole. But here, once again, we return to the problem of time and finance, and that funding does not often allow for such synthesis, or at least not for the kind of synthesis that adds as much value as it could.

Agency and *incidencia*: short routes and long routes

Rimisp's network and social capital assets are central to the ways in which it deals with the question of "incidencia" (best translated as influence in policy and public debate). In this sense it is not clear whether the Rimisp model is clear on how best to organize itself in order to achieve *incidencia*. Arguably this reflects the existence of two slightly contrasting cultures of operation within Rimisp as well as an uncertainty over the relative merits and desirability of short and longer routes to policy influence.

Central to Rimisp is the question of learning networks (Guijt et al., 2005; Guijt et al., 2002), and central to several of its projects is the notion of building organizational capacities through learning. Indeed, it is the pursuit of such a goal that attracts agencies such as ICCO and IFAD to Rimisp. As noted earlier, in a formal sense these two agencies (and in part IDRC) contract Rimisp to implement a capacity building project. In contractual arrangements such as these Rimisp is less an actor than an executor of a contract.⁵⁸ The projects do not allow for Rimisp action independent of implementation, and thus create little formal space in which Rimisp might be a hub of collective learning that then seeks to influence others on the basis of that learning. Nor do these projects allow for any significant synthesis of learning that might serve as a vehicle of aggregate *incidencia*. The limitations on (and of) the end of cycle synthesis documents has been noted by the Council of the Grupo Chorlavi and the systematization of the Grupo concluded that any such aggregate influence on policy was "far more incipient" (Escobar et al., 2006: 55) than the learning effects it has had in individual organizations that have participated in the group's activities.

Thus, the combined effect of: a concept (learning network) that leads the implementer to push itself into the background and focus on building the capacities of others in the hope that via these capacities they will have some sort of influence in rural development processes and policies; and a contract that formalizes this service role, reduces Rimisp's agency and thus also possibilities for policy influence (*incidencia*). Thus, though not explicitly so, in these projects the model of policy influence (if one can be determined) is that of the "long route" from knowledge generation to policy – in which third party social actors, working with ideas generated through a relationship

⁵⁸ This is also reflected in the fact that a number of grantees under the Grupo Chorlavi have little sense of what Rimisp is – all they "see" is the Grupo Chorlavi's implementing team who, though they are Rimisp staff, can at times be viewed as Chorlavi.

with Rimisp, do the influencing. Furthermore it is a model with all the related assumptions that need to be in place for these third party actors to play such a role and have such an effect.

However, in each of these cases, the on-going life of the contract between the funder and Rimisp has created a space that Rimisp has increasingly colonized, allowing it to complement the contractual relationships with dialogue. That is, in each of these cases Rimisp has over time converted a weak tie into a strong tie as a combined effect of a conscious strategy of investment in social capital, as well as of the behaviour of Rimisp that has also elicited increasing levels of trust – "along the way a relationship of trust slowly emerged".⁵⁹ As a result, Rimisp has turned learning network projects into relationships allowing for policy influence (see Section 2), in which the influence is an act of Rimisp, not of other project *socios*. However, this influence tends to be limited to the organization funding the project – it does not spread much more widely nor, does it spread into the sphere of public debate.

This pattern – in which *incidencia* is made possible by the cultivation of strong ties with actors inside organizations that define policies – is visible in other parts of Rimisp's work. Other agencies – drawing upon the respect and trust they have developed in the context of a project relationship – have also requested Rimisp input (often at no charge) into policy and program framing and more than once this input has had a formative effect on policy. Indeed, it is at least a defensible hypothesis that to the extent that Rimisp has been an agent of policy influence, it has exercised much of this agency behind the scenes, in face-to-face settings and largely through verbal discourse. This face-to-face, verbal interaction then opens space for more formal involvement in drafting documents, some of which are of great significance (e.g. IDB's Rural Development Strategy and the rural development chapter of the 2008 World Development Report).

In this sense, Rimisp's model has not encouraged it (the formal organization) to assume significant agency, and this has limited the extent to which its projects have been able to *influence* policy. In this sense, while some of its projects reflect a "long route" approach to policy influence, this is largely an article of faith and there is little evidence of any such *incidencia*. Conversely, *as an organization*, Rimisp's practice of *incidencia* is very much a "short route" approach, one made possible by the cultivation of particular forms of social capital, particular relationships of trust.

Organizational culture in Rimisp

Analytically, organizational culture is a slippery concept; yet in lay terms it is one that is frequently used to refer to the "feel" of an organization. Here it is used to refer to the values and practices that are present in the everyday life and work of an organization, and the social relationships that sustain them. The reflection seems important, because for many observers, this culture is identifiable and is one of Rimisp's more important assets.

⁵⁹ "En el camino se fue creando una relación de confianza."

Repeatedly observers refer to Rimisp as professional, transparent and honest, and these values are seen as guiding Rimisp practice. Furthermore, these values are grounded in practices, including: the use of competitive mechanisms for allocating project funds, combined with third party review of proposals within projects such as Chorlaví and TREM; external auditing of review processes; the posting of Rimisp accounts on its website; the nature of its reporting to funding agencies; the meeting of deadlines for reporting and milestones; the incorporation within projects of advisory committees that are given a degree of decision making authority; and others. This creates a culture that is absolutely an asset and Rimisp is viewed as a model of NGO "good governance". Funding agency interviewees commented several times that they wished they had more partners that were in this regard like Rimisp. For project officers the feeling that they do not have to be second guessing Rimisp's real intentions when they are talking with them is a welcome relief. As noted above, this also has the corollary effect of creating forms of social capital that then help open up other opportunities for Rimisp.

Another dimension of organizational culture that some observers – generally from the left and from the NGO community, though in some cases closer to social movement organizations – associate with Rimisp relate to the sense that it has a "Chilean" identity. What appears to make it "Chilean" to these observers is the degree to which market deepening is not just a lens for analysis but also a value that appears to govern how Rimisp looks at rural development problems. A significant number of observers beyond Chile suggest that this perspective is progressively less relevant beyond Chile. While in some cases such observations may reflect other types of sensitivity (institutional competition etc.), in others they appear to be quite genuine concerns.

Within Rimisp, values of professionalism are again prominent. Professionalism manifests itself in ways of working, ways of treating staff and the sheer *quantity* of work that people do. There are occasional slippages – administrative staff sometimes recognized for their errors, but not for their successes, inadequately clear communication leading to tensions down the line, occasionally acerbic behavior from researchers vis-à-vis administrative staff. But by and large the values appear to create a sense of working as a whole ("a big family"⁶⁰) and a sense of privilege at having the opportunity to work in a dynamic, relevant, professionally excellent institution.

There are, though, certain absences that also define the culture of Rimisp. That only one PI is a woman, while support staff and research assistants are primarily women expresses an evident gender imbalance in the work environment, and demonstrates an organizational culture in which men and conversations among men dominate. This is further deepened by the fact that the sole female PI is based in Bolivia and not Chile, and therefore that when the PIs in Santiago go out for lunch, by default these become men only affairs. The end of the Friday wine-tasting tradition and increasingly fewer birthday gatherings (due to the increasing workload and travel schedules of Rimisp) only deepens deepens the extent to which non-work social interactions breakdown largely along gender lines (as well as generational and job-role lines) within the organization. There seems a genuine sense of disappointment about the perceived distance between the principal researchers and the remaining Rimisp staff. To the extent that this is visible externally, it creates an image among some (female) interviewees that Rimisp is something of an 'old boys club', and internally it creates a work environment that is relatively gender blind. This has a

⁶⁰ "Una gran familia".

series of consequences. Gender has not been well incorporated into guiding questions for projects (some more than others).⁶¹ There are more men than women among the group with "strong ties" to Rimisp, and there is a very small number of people in this group whose work deals in any significant way with gendered dimensions of development. More generally, some inside Rimisp have noted that it does not have a positive discrimination personnel policy on gender issues.

Also weak within Rimisp's work environment is the question of ethnic and racial difference. Minority/indigenous backgrounds are not represented among research staff, and it is also the case that the indigenous and racial question is only weakly present in the overall balance of the PIs' personal research trajectories.⁶² That said, the ethnic question – unlike gender – *has* been brought more centrally into the initial conception of some of the more recent research projects – notably TREM and Municipios Indígenas, but also Territorios con Identidad Cultural.

These gendered and racial/ethnic dimensions of Rimisp's organizational culture perhaps reflect a more abstract dimension. This is that Rimisp's appears to be an organizational environment in which the relationships between difference, power and conflict are not part of everyday language (e.g. as simple indicators see: the research calls of Chorlaví, the themes worked in FIDAMERICA, or the headings in the DTR document). Within social science, concerns for gender and race have, perhaps more than anything else, had the effect of placing power as a central category for analysis. A healthy segment of development studies has also tackled this. Rimisp's work has not, however, and in some regard this may be a reflection of internal culture more than external environment. In this sense, Rimisp's organizational culture seems to lead it toward a constellation of perspectives on rural Latin America that while not necessarily incorrect (the role of this evaluation is not to determine their "correctness") are most certainly incomplete. The implication is that if internal culture were modified, then the balance of Rimisp's problematization of rural Latin America might also shift.

Financial and administrative practice

In a very real sense, Rimisp's administrative and financial model reflects elements of its underlying values. Its administration is designed to minimize and manage spending, as well as help to keep overheads in check. Expenditure on projects is monitored closely by an Administrative Committee, with no expenditure going unallocated to a project heading. IT is used as far as possible to reduce spending (e.g. the use of Skype is obligatory). At the same time, one of the effects of Rimisp's growth over the last four years has been to reduce per project fixed costs. As a result Rimisp has been able to bring down real overheads from around 20 percent in 2002, to ten percent in 2005/6. Administrative practice thus runs Rimisp as a lean machine that, is also deemed by some staff to run the risk of becoming increasingly impersonal precisely because of the pressure on lean-ness and productivity (e.g. see above regarding the loss of wine-tasting socials on Fridays).

⁶¹ And where efforts have been made to incorporate gender – as in TREM – this was *ex post facto* rather than in the initial conception of the program, meaning that its treatment would always be inadequate and frustrating for all.

⁶² As evidenced in their publications.

If one part of the model is designed to minimize costs, another part seeks to ensure income and allow for PIs to supplement their own incomes while also generating income for Rimisp. In this model PIs must cover half of their income from their role as PI on a given project. Referring back to Figure 2 if the oval refers to the entirety of Rimisp's costs, with PIs paid 12 months of salary, this model means that PIs must also generate a significant amount of additional work. The additional work is needed in order to: pay their salaries; cover their annual overhead cost to Rimisp (in order to fill in all the green space in that part of the oval not covered by large projects); *and* raise the resources for all the funding that passes through Rimisp and funds work done by *socios* and others (in funding this pass-through Rimisp calculates that on average each PI raises three to ten times the cost of their own salary and costs). In this sense, each large project is (in strictly financial terms) not nearly as significant to Rimisp as it might seem on paper, given that a large part of the budget is in fact transitional (is passed through to other *socios*). Some of this comes back to Rimisp as individual projects contract other Rimisp staff to conduct certain tasks on projects that may otherwise have been outsourced. Project systematizations, proposal reviews, training events, designs of annual research themes in Chorlavi etc. have each been contracted to other Rimisp staff.⁶³ This has the advantage of keeping some budget in-house, though also has the disadvantages of reducing exposure to other non-Rimisp interpretations of what is occurring within these projects and of having proposals evaluated by persons who are not necessarily experts in the particular field.

After this, the remainder of the green part of the Figure 2 has to be covered by consulting work, small grants and shorter term assignments. Furthermore, some PIs spend a significant part of their time on non-budgeted activities – conference attendance, unfunded advice to donor agencies, support to *socios* and academic writing (where possible). This time reflects not only the general professionalism of Rimisp's PIs: it is also an effect of the reciprocal claims made on Rimisp by its strong ties, as well as Rimisp's own continuing investment in these existing as well as other potential strong ties. Whatever the case, this additional work also represents a significant claim on PI time, and means that in practice Rimisp PIs have to work overtime just in order to cover 100 percent of the institution's costs. To consider also the further time that PIs dedicate trying to increase their own remuneration through additional consultancies (in which income is always shared with the institution) the immense pressures on PI time are more than evident.

In this sense, the revenue generation component of Rimisp's strategy for financial sustainability threatens its own conditions of existence, in predominantly two ways. The first is human – travel and work loads make significant demands on health and well being. The second is reputational. The year 2005 saw at least three episodes in which work pressures and the multiple demands on PIs, led to situations in which PIs were not able to dedicate the time that certain projects required at critical moments. In each instance, Rimisp's reputation was compromised: in one instance within a country, in the other instance in a region with Chile. In two of the cases a trusted funding agency was also involved. While in each instance the situation was rescued, the threat to Rimisp's brand was real and the memory remains, placing the bar slightly higher in any future working relationship.

⁶³ This is not to say that *all* such reviews and systematizations are contracted to Rimisp staff, some are also contracted externally.

These experiences are indicative. On the one hand they suggest that the model of each PI being the single manager of a project, while keeping lines of management and responsibility clean (and also keeping revenue generation lines clear), is insufficient to ensure quality and ensure the completion of project management responsibilities during periods when there is particularly acute pressure on one PI's time. Replacing PIs with research assistants is an inadequate response and can leave sponsors feeling short-changed. Perhaps more seriously, the experiences suggest a vulnerability in the Rimisp model, despite the model being emulated and upheld as an example for others. This model – one that combines the financial model of a consulting group, with the social (strong ties) model of an NGO – places serious pressures on staff, and therefore on the institutional brand. Furthermore, in the absence of institutional funding or reserves, it is a model that is without a safety net. In this sense, it is not a model that is especially resilient in the terms of its capacity to absorb and recover from high-magnitude, low frequency external shocks.⁶⁴

Governance and human resource management

While Rimisp has a Board, in practice it is governed less like an NGO and rather more like a university department with a strong Chair. The main management body is the Management Committee which is made up of all principal investigators. This committee – like a department faculty meeting of tenured professors – discusses and takes strategic management decisions. On a day-to-day basis, however, the President (the strong Chair) makes more immediate decisions consulting informally and electronically with PIs when necessary.

This arrangement for decision making reflects a progressive formalization of governance within Rimisp over the past decade. When Rimisp was smaller, and the two or three PIs worked and traveled together much decision making was done informally. As it grew, this was no longer a viable approach, and the formal, regular meetings of the management committee reflect recognition of this. In addition, the committee has begun to hold an annual retreat – a field trip to an area of particular thematic interest to Rimisp. This retreat is also intended to serve as an informal sphere in which ideas about vision and strategy can be discussed and formulated.

If the decision making aspects of management have become more formalized in recent years, this is not yet the case with human resource management. In practice, of course, proactive HRM in such a small and financially lean organization is not easy, and few NGOs are good at HRM. However, it remains an issue for Rimisp – less on performance issues (for the intimacy of the environment plus the work ethos and organizational culture ensure high levels of performance – slippages notwithstanding) but more in terms of human resource development (HRD). There are three dimensions to HRD that are particularly important. The first – if Rimisp wishes to grow its formal research capacities – is to find ways of helping PIs and Research Associates to do doctoral degrees. This not only offers scope to acquire research training; it also stimulates these PIs and RAs to developing their own identities within the world of disciplinary research and international

⁶⁴ While Rimisp recovered once from such a shock in 1994 (with the withdrawal of IDRC support), at that time it was made up of just a couple of regular staff. The Rimisp of today is a quite different entity, and several orders of magnitude larger.

research networks (though a strategic choice of PhD advisors is critical). In this area, Rimisp has made some progress, creating the space for one PI and one RA to begin doctoral degrees (and one PI, the President, to finish a PhD). The second is to contribute to the production of a younger generation of researchers who with time will be able to move into the ranks of Rimisp's research associates and PIs. A start has been made in this respect, with help to research assistants in developing their own knowledge of rural development debates and in enrolling in or completing graduate degrees. However, there is no active policy for bringing in younger researchers, and the one time when Rimisp PIs commented formally on research assistants' ideas, was at the initiative of the assistants. While RAs enjoy their work environment and find PIs accessible and open to discussing ideas, a slightly more active policy may be required – perhaps especially given the gender and generational issues referred to earlier. By the same token, there is also a case to be made for a more conscious policy on developing linkages with universities with a view to making the recruitment of assistants a slightly more strategic process.

The third domain of HRD, and one that has received less attention, is for the administrative staff. HRD here has the combined role of offering incentives (and recognition for performance) as well as an internal capacity development instrument in administrative domains requiring more attention. While financial (merit-based) incentives to performance have been introduced, non-financial, human resource development incentives have not.⁶⁵ Another dimension of such HRD would also be simply to provide administrative staff with periodic (perhaps annual) update on Rimisp's substantive areas of work, not only to help staff identify more with Rimisp but also to be more effective in anticipating and understanding issues as they arise. However, the evidence suggests that as far as administrative staff understand the substance of Rimisp's work in rural development, this is largely because they have taught themselves and read documents on their own time.

In the longer term, a human resource development strategy is as important to organizational sustainability as a financial strategy. While Rimisp may continue to attract senior, established professionals it will also be important to encourage younger PIs, coming from different cultural, political, intellectual and professional backgrounds, for not only will they be the source of a subsequent generation of PIs – they will also be the vectors of new and challenging ways of thinking about rural challenges facing Latin America.

⁶⁵ Incentives such as language or skills training.

Section 4: Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

Rimisp, its nature and its roles

There can be no doubt that Rimisp is a respected, trusted and extremely competent organization. It is an organization with which a wide range of actors *want* to cooperate, that funding agencies consider a model partner, and that many within the community of international agricultural and rural development deem to be a leading player. It is hard to imagine an organization that could be more respected.

That it is so respected implies that Rimisp has resolved the problem of legitimacy that is such a recurrent challenge for NGOs, raised in the early parts of this report. Through what mechanisms did Rimisp gain legitimacy? In an influential book on NGOs, Edwards and Hulme (1995) suggested (in the book's subtitle) that there were perhaps two avenues through which legitimacy can be won: performance and accountability. In Rimisp's case, the avenue has been that of performance. Repeatedly in interviews undertaken for this study, Rimisp was lauded for its transparency, honesty, professionalism, efficiency and unaligned independence. These performance criteria – related to how (and how well) Rimisp works – are the sources of its remarkable legitimacy.

Conversely, *institutional* accountability mechanisms are not a significant source of Rimisp's legitimacy. Indeed, while Rimisp's large projects have such mechanisms⁶⁶ – ones which are perhaps more oriented toward donor and intellectual accountability rather than societal accountability – Rimisp as an institution does not. Indeed, as we noted, its mode of governance is more akin to that of an academic department⁶⁷ at a university. While Rimisp has many links with Latin American rural society, it is not embedded within a specific part of the sector. This grants the organization the independence and balance that several of its donors appear to value, though also implies a certain detachment, particularly from ground level organizations and social movements that other *socios* feel slightly less comfortable about.

This positioning vis-à-vis interest groups is related to the answer to a second theme posed at the outset: how Rimisp is related to broader socio-political projects in the region. This is a difficult mapping exercise, for three reasons. Firstly, because the labels associated with these projects are so ideologically charged that their analytical meaning can be easily lost, clouding the possibility of any serious discussion of what is implied when they are used. Secondly, because different interviewees place Rimisp in three of these four projects (excluding the authoritarian option), suggesting that what situating Rimisp depends largely on the observer, and how others situate

⁶⁶ In the form of advisory and decision making councils.

⁶⁷ Fortunately not a dysfunctional department.

Rimisp is not necessarily the same as where Rimisp would situate itself. And thirdly, because positioning Rimisp contradicts the value that both it and others attach to its independence. Yet independence is relative and it is unlikely that any organization would want to be known for not standing for anything in particular. In this sense, then, Rimisp's independence derives from its efforts to avoid being tied to any particular interest group or organization, as well as from the fact that it grounds its legitimacy in the quality and professionalism of its work rather than in being embedded within any particular part of Latin American societies. Independence does not suggest an absence of a larger project – to the contrary, the Rimisp larger project plays an important part in defining its role in the region.

The balance suggests that Rimisp is best understood as part of a hybrid project that is essentially concerned with modernizing social democratic approaches (in Rimisp's specific case, approaches to rural development) and with injecting them with far more sensitivity regarding the place of market deepening and broadening in any project concerned with social inclusion. This is a project that combines social democracy's concerns for distribution, justice and market governance with the neoliberal lesson that market liberalization (duly governed) can deliver positive benefits. Rimisp's place within this project also helps define the organization's meta-roles in the region, namely: to continue opening up and deepening analysis of the role of markets and appropriate forms of market governance within a broadly social democratic idea of what Latin America might be; to work with *socios* who identify, broadly, with the same commitments; and to sustain and develop learning networks and capacities that help organizations engage with and act on this set of commitments.

This position, coupled with the performance qualities noted above, allow Rimisp to have the conversations it does. That is, the high level conversations with a range of funding agencies, some governments, and many civil society actors who – though some find Rimisp's line elitist, disturbingly pro-market and insufficiently critical of the "real" structures of power in the region – recognize, value and feel they have much to learn from and be challenged by when they engage with Rimisp. The second important role and specific contribution for Rimisp is to help deepen conversations such as these, conversations that might otherwise not happen.

Such conversations are not idle, indulgent exercises. They are (we move to the third part of the conceptual scheme) the primary instruments through which Rimisp effects its *incidencia* in public policy. The conversations that occur through its learning networks aim to affect the practices of rural development embodied in the work of Rimisp's *socios* with the possibility (not yet demonstrated) that they may scale up to broader influences. Conversely, the high level conversations go straight to policy debates within multilaterals, some governments and some bilaterals. The third dimension of Rimisp's role is to take the agenda that it and its *socios* are working on and influence policy debates and statements, primarily through what we characterized as the short route to policy influence.

In playing these roles, Rimisp would seem to be best compared to a non-partisan think-tank that would be equally at home in Washington DC, London or Amsterdam.⁶⁸ The fact that it is based in Latin America is a tremendous asset to the region and hardly any interviewee could name a

⁶⁸ Indeed, some interviewees compared Rimisp to IIED (in the UK) or an "under-funded IFPRI."

similar organization in Latin America with the same regional reach. Yet, there appear to be several reasons why the think-tank comparison may be premature. First, a far larger part of Rimisp's project and staff portfolio is oriented towards helping others think, rather than thinking itself. Second, and related, Rimisp has no institutional resources to give it the resources and space to think (funding partners have not helped in this regard). Third, Rimisp does not have an established mechanism (apart from a website) to distribute its thinking. It seems a defensible (though unproven) hypothesis that currently Rimisp's main dissemination mechanism is travel – people adopt Rimisp ideas when they hear them articulated by Rimisp staff traveling through Latin America, North America and Europe. And fourth, Rimisp's staff composition is not that of a think-tank.

Indeed, the think-tank comparison may not only be premature, but may also not be the best place to situate Rimisp in terms of deciding which of its own capacities to build. If not a think-tank, then what is Rimisp? In one way – understood in its pared down form, as Rimisp the organization - it is on the way to becoming a perfected regional version of what several of its PIs' earlier institutions had aimed to be, but ultimately fell short of being, at a national level. That is, institutions that combined project-based field engagement with synthetic research and publication – manifestations of what Lehmann was trying to capture with the notion of the "informal university". Yet in each case, with time, the project-based work overtook the research work, the urge to grow created a bureaucracy that ultimately worked against intellectual quality, and internal conflicts soured the institutional culture. Rimisp has survived these three pathologies, and in so doing has carved out a space in which it is able to bridge engagement in ground level processes with (some) abstraction and synthesis, bridge operational and policy levels, and bridge civil society actors and the policy technocracy.

But even this comparison is not ideal, because it means thinking of Rimisp as an organization. Yet another dimension of what Rimisp is resides in blurring the boundary between Rimisp the core organization (defined by its website buttons) and Rimisp understood as a bundle of networks, some of whose members have elements of a collective identity. That is, Rimisp has managed to plug into and mold an epistemic community that means it acts through many more people than those named as personnel on its website. Anchoring and contributing to this community has been another of the roles of Rimisp the organization.

How has it built this complex identity and set of roles? "They're bloody hardworking", one interviewee commented, and there is little doubt that this is an important part of the explanation. Put another way, and in terms more closely related to the PIs' intellectual past, one might say that they have been Chayanovian producers, self-exploiting in order to meet the consumption needs of the domestic enterprise and, to meet the consumption needs of the extended domestic enterprise, because Rimisp's core staff generate some of the resources used by non-staff members of this epistemic community.⁶⁹ Indeed, the metaphor of family and close friends cropped up often when people both inside and outside Rimisp aimed to describe the organization: it's "a big family"; "in the end, I sense that it is all one family ... a collective"; "is Rimisp a research network or is it a group of buddies?" These strong ties (or "bonding social capital") within Rimisp elicit enormous commitment. As noted earlier, though, this level of self-exploitation is hardly

⁶⁹ Only "some of" these resources, but often these other actors also mobilize and contribute resources.

sustainable – for human reasons as well as the institutional brand. It has also been possible because of the qualities, predispositions and personal/professional networks of the people who have been invited to become PIs. Rimisp has astutely bought in social capital as much as it has cultivated the social capital necessary for it to bridge these different worlds. This achievement has also been possible because of an interest in cultivating and sustaining a particular organizational culture in which certain professional and social mores are paramount (see above).

Finally, and this cannot be understated, Rimisp has cultivated its donor relations such that some of the donors bring Rimisp into their inner sanctum. These donors begin to need Rimisp - if not as much as Rimisp needs them, then certainly a great deal. This close relationship has opened avenues for impact not simply in policy but in how officials think: "it has enriched me a great deal" commented one senior official. Through the new opportunities that such a close relationships open up (as in the cases of IFAD, IDRC, Ford, Mideplan, ICCO) they have also allowed Rimisp to continue growing. Part of this has been achieved through the quality of work done within individual projects, and part through consciously giving donors what they want and need. With well-tailored narrative reports, clear financial reports, additional advice and support when needed, Rimisp has helped make donor officials lives both easier and more interesting: their products "are different from the other things we receive". One donor interviewee's comment that "it is a real privilege for us to have this link" – is a statement that several of Rimisp's donors could have made.

And yet, this has not translated into institutional funding support from these donors. Indeed, for a number of the donors, perhaps for all to a greater or lesser extent, the relationship with Rimisp is seen as one in which they fund Rimisp to implement an activity. Donors have rarely invested in Rimisp for its own sake. The closest a funding relationship came to such investment might have been the TREM program with IDRC, but even then this apparent intent on IDRC's part was either not made clear or was not understood, and Rimisp ended up implementing TREM as a quasi-Chorlavi project rather than an institutional investment program. It would be unfair to suggest that donors free-ride on Rimisp, though in practice this is somehow happening. Thus, even if some of these donors want Rimisp to become more of a think-tank, the way in which they fund works against this possibility.

Rimisp's products and their effects?

As mentioned earlier, Rimisp post 2000 identifies its institutional goal and strategies as being to "promote organizational learning and innovation in public and private projects, programs and policies in order to promote inclusion, equity, well being and democratic development and Latin American rural societies." The discussion in Section 2 reviewed material to discern the extent to which Rimisp delivers these goals, distinguishing between the project specific products and institutional products.

First, there seems little doubt that, in particular through projects such as FIDAMERICA and Chorlavi, Rimisp promotes organizational learning among local civil society and governmental

organizations concerned with rural development.⁷⁰ It has also made contributions to organizational learning among the group of international actors with which it is most closely associated, even if those learning processes sometimes are truncated due to changes within the organizations that lead to the departure of Rimisp's main champions and "idea amplifiers". In the same vein, a number of interviewees felt that Rimisp had influenced regional, national and international debates on rural development.

Likewise, it would be hard to argue that Rimisp has not fostered innovation though in some instances Rimisp's roles are clearer at the adaptation, rather than the basic or strategic, phase of research. The research on supermarkets is deemed perhaps the most innovative piece of work in which Rimisp has been involved as a lead actor, but the work on ERNA and DTR are also viewed by a number of commentators as quite innovative, even if these latter two domains of innovation are as much adaptive as they are strategic. Rimisp has also innovated in a systems sense. Almost universally it is seen as a lead Latin American innovator in putting together learning systems with a strong e-component. But it has also innovated in its own way of being – its own institutional form. These innovations are highly valued: in the words of one international interviewee: "their technical prowess holding electronic conferences and linking researchers across the region to debate issues on the future of agriculture in Latin America is also impressive. If only we could see more Rimisps emerging in other parts of the world, particularly Africa."

It is far harder to say whether these innovations and social learning processes translate into more inclusive, equitable and democratic rural societies. This of course is a recurrent problem for knowledge generating institutions. In these years of "impact fetishism", the difficulty in linking research to easy-to-isolate, measurable, material impacts in rural poverty has lead to the progressive withdrawal of support to knowledge generating non-profits in Latin America creating a serious gap in the region and leaving public debate to be dominated by interests with politically distinct positions. If one values such non-profit, independent (but broadly social democratic) knowledge generation, both for its inherent value as well as its potential contribution to policy and public debate, then this decline is a cause of great concern.⁷¹ It also leaves a clear niche that needs to be filled by organizations such as Rimisp.

An evaluation of this nature cannot form a firm view on how far the knowledge generated through Rimisp's work fosters more inclusive and equitable rural societies or reduces poverty. We can however note that over the course of interviews no one claimed that what Rimisp has done was irrelevant to such a goal or that Rimisp ought not to exist. To the contrary, among those who share these goals (which includes all persons interviewed) Rimisp was seen as an asset of considerable value, as playing a vital, region-wide knowledge generating and knowledge brokering role that few others can or do. Perhaps the greatest caveat around the efficacy of the causal link between what Rimisp does and the democratization and socially progressive transformation of rural Latin America revolves around the limited extent to which Rimisp engages with social movements. This caveat, however, is located at the centre of deep theoretical and ideological debates within Latin America and beyond. These are debates as to whether the

⁷⁰ This assertion is supported by the finding of the reviews of those programs (Piña, 2005; Escobar et al., 2006), even if in the case of Chorlaví, the review was conducted by a Rimisp team.

⁷¹ It is for this reviewer.

path to inclusive, democratizing growth lies more in contentious politics or in the "good" governance of market deepening: Tarrow or North, Fox or Putnam. If one is more inclined to the former option, then there would be reason to doubt the causal efficacy of Rimisp's model; if toward the latter (as are most of Rimisp's closest financial *socios*), then there is far more scope for optimism.

Recommendations: discussion points

In a study of this nature, offering recommendations is perhaps less helpful than raising certain points for in-depth discussion. This final section identifies the most pertinent issues arising from this analysis.

Should Rimisp aim to become a think-tank?

This is perhaps the most important point of discussion, because it has been explicitly suggested that this is the preferred path for Rimisp as it looks to the future. The question, however, is what type of think-tank, and what are the other options?

It is clear that Rimisp is hard to define: for some observers it is think-tank, for others a development NGO, for others a Foundation, for others a consultancy. Even within Rimisp itself there are quite distinct definitions of what it is. The definitional uncertainty is not necessarily problematic as it locates Rimisp as a suitably post-modern, hybrid institution. Indeed, many observers deem this very hybrid nature as central to Rimisp's strength: its ability to link research and practice, to work with both local civil society actors and international financial institutions, to support capacity building as well as generate knowledge. Certain think-tank models would reduce the scope for this diversity, would tend to further distance Rimisp from grassroots actors in rural Latin America, and would make Rimisp more elitist (a risk, given that a few observers already view it as somewhat elitist). They could also pull Rimisp away from the networking that is so central to its identity and begin to harden boundaries between the organization and the network, boundaries whose porosity has served Rimisp well. Such purer think-tank models arguably also require different capacities from those that Rimisp currently possesses. They are models which tend to need a significant core of highly recognized researchers, each already hooked into particular funding sources (or different parts of the same source). This is what makes them financially viable. It is not clear that this profile fits Rimisp's current professional capacities.

The implication is that Rimisp ought not to change too much. However, there is a case to be made for building up some parts of the model more than others, and this is where the think-tank analogy is more helpful. Currently, notwithstanding Rimisp's self-presentation as a research institute, research is what it as an organization does least of. This reflects a mix of funding agency bias against supporting research, path dependence within Rimisp, and also its staff profile. This relative absence of research is, arguably, what leads some observers to be unclear as to what it is that Rimisp stands for. Likewise it is what leads many to identify its main products

in terms of service provision rather than intellectual and political content (which is not the same as questioning PIs' intellectual abilities). One path is for Rimisp to choose to primarily be a service provider, a facilitator and supporter of capacity building. Most of its funding agencies would be satisfied with this because although they value immensely what they learn from Rimisp, what they seek first and foremost from Rimisp is a guaranteed ability to deliver high quality project implementation services.

This is the safer option, and indeed one of Rimisp's main donors senses that this is the option that Rimisp has begun to take – that it has begun to stagnate, to have a routine, to know what it does well and kept doing it. This donor acknowledges being "surprised that they have not been more proactive and visionary," feeling that Rimisp "have settled into a pattern," and that "to keep the organization interesting it has to move on to new challenges." Growing the research part of Rimisp would be part of such a move towards new challenges and while it would not be easy, if current expectations regarding the second phase of TREM are confirmed, there would soon be resources available for such selective growth. This would allow Rimisp to make more sustained contributions to rural development debates, to make clearer which particular debates it wants most to contribute to, and to broaden its international visibility. It would be a turning point for the Rimisp brand from an ISO-type service quality brand, into a combined quality and substantive brand.

Growing the research component of Rimisp should not mean reducing the other components in absolute terms (for this mix is what defines many of Rimisp's core institutional assets), just in relative terms. In this partial transition, the most relevant model that most approximates Rimisp is probably IIED in the UK⁷² (and it is no accident that Rimisp and IIED already have links).

Steps towards a strengthened research culture

In practice, what might such a change of balance imply? First, it would mean limited growth in the number of PIs (we discuss below the *types* of PI that might be sought). Most donors suggested they would not be averse to seeing some growth, though expressed concern about possible increased costs; and other commentators also suggested that Rimisp could also grow. In such growth, the emphasis would be on recruiting slightly more research oriented PIs.

Second, a shift from a project based structure to a programmatic structure would be necessary, in which program titles make clear the substantive areas in which Rimisp aims to contribute. The challenge in such a model would be to avoid bureaucratization, to protect a window allowing continuing experimentation in non-program themes. Adopting a program structure ought not imply that staff must fit into one or another program, nor that a new layer of management is created. Indeed, as long as increased quality control mechanisms can be built into project management (to guard brand image and quality more carefully) there is no persuasive reason for dropping the Task Manager model of project management that Rimisp currently employs. In this sense, adopting a program based structure is more for reasons of external identity and contributions, rather than internal management. The challenge is to promote further learning

⁷² On this I apologize for my own national and work history biases.

synergies among projects so that *collectively* they are able to contribute to programmatic learning. What is clear is that facilitating this collective program based learning cannot be an additional task of the Presidency.

Third, and related, Rimisp must strengthen its communication and publication strategy, and in a way that is linked to this programmatic structure. This strategy must be more than the information provision that has dominated the bulk of Rimisp communication to date. It will be important to contribute to issues of debate and substance. While the opening of a series on Debates and Rural Themes is a start, there is much more that can be done – above all in print, rather than electronic media. Options here are many – joint publications with like minded counterparts in the region (Cepes, Grade, IEP, Cebrap), with university presses etc. The larger point is that within the region, print contributions still seem to matter more than internet based ones in terms of the goal of influencing broader theoretical and public debates.⁷³

Fourth, Rimisp could capitalize on its Santiago location as a means of enhancing a research presence and culture, and be more explicit in offering support for sabbatical scholars from within and outside Latin America. For scholars with young families⁷⁴ Santiago is a great location for a sabbatical year: easier, safer, more Euro-American in culture. One can imagine a scheme in which Rimisp is able to offer partial support for research fellows complementing the six months of salary they usually bring from their home institutions, *on the condition that* the fellow locates part of their work that year within a programmatic area of Rimisp's work.⁷⁵ A comparative model is that of the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale, which has built a program identity (and made a sustained intellectual contribution to Anglophone debates on rural development) through combining the intellectual brilliance of its iconoclastic Director James Scott, a seminar series, a building with spare office space, and a round of visiting scholars.

Fifth, Rimisp would also need to find a way of resourcing PI time to write beyond the project report or synthesis documents already expected. This has been done before, but the toll is high in terms of time and budget and burdensome when the activity is not budgeted. Few donors will pay for time to prepare academic journal articles and books, notwithstanding the fact that they read and were influenced by them when they were at university. Combining such PI writing with guest contributions around a small set of core programmatic themes, Rimisp would be able to make far more visible, substantive and substantiated contributions to rural development debates in the region and internationally.

Of course, all this implies a cost at a time when donors do not gladly support research. However, with two or three of Rimisp's current donors, a conversation on the possibility of something akin to this seems possible. Again, the second phase of TREM may open some space for some of this funding. A visiting scholar program is conceivably something that could be discussed with parts of the Chilean private sector though choices as to sponsors would obviously have to be made carefully. Foundations such as Ford are more than happy to support such initiatives in the North.

⁷³ This notwithstanding the remarkable life of Schejtman and Berdegue, 2003.

⁷⁴ I speak here from my own experience.

⁷⁵ Fellows from Latin American universities are of course far less likely to bring a partial salary and in this case the costs would be higher and would likely need to be funded from projects and so imply a proportionally greater contribution of the fellow's time to a specific Rimisp activity.

The path would not be easy, but if any non-profit, Latin American proto-think-tank/NGO research centre has the chance to do this on rural issues, it is Rimisp.

Should Rimisp engage new themes?

If not always explicitly, Rimisp has used DTR, learning networks and market deepening to anchor its work, and these are areas in which it clearly feels at home. These themes have also, perhaps, begun to make work appear somewhat predictable and, ironically, may serve to convey a sense of less independence than Rimisp would like. Some observers look at the collection of work done by Rimisp and wonder whether they see an organization that is *too* interested in market deepening and not interested enough in the politics of exclusion: an institution that sees institutionally constrained rational actors in the countryside more than historically constituted collectivities embedded in relations of power.

For these reasons a case can be made for initiating work on new themes. Other reasons relate to current processes of change in Latin America. The April 2006 social movements conference hosted by Rimisp placed some of these processes on the table: the transformative effects of Brazilian investment beyond Brazil as well as within; new conflicts over rural development triggered by extractive industries; new forms of large capital investment in the region; the political significance of certain types of rurally based social movement; the indigenous question; the rural effects of free trade agreements; etc. However, that seminar also raised doubts as to the extent to which Rimisp wanted to tackle some of these themes: indeed, it seemed to counterpose the perspective on rural change emphasizing the role of dynamic markets in rural poverty alleviation and economic inclusion with another that emphasized the conflicts that are inherent in rural development and which may be taking new forms in the region. Rimisp seems comfortable with the former - a reflection, perhaps, of the aversion to conflict that some commentators suggest exists within the organization. This comfort seems to be reflected in the extent to which, having opened up an area of work (social movements) which gave more visibility to the conflict that is the flip side of development, the organization has quickly stepped back from these questions in the way it has framed a possible second phase of TREM. This seems unfortunate, given that several interviewees felt that Rimisp should in fact *further deepen* its work on social movements, rather than move away from it.

To what extent does Rimisp want to help actors think more clearly about what they want to hear and find easier to digest, as opposed to present actors with themes that they are less comfortable with, and then help them to think about how to engage with these more difficult issues? Each is a legitimate and viable option. Furthermore, the former may be preferred by Rimisp's current donors even if ironically, it might lead Rimisp towards the slow stagnation that some of these same donors say they see emerging within Rimisp.

How Rimisp chooses among these options will determine the characteristics of any new PIs it may incorporate in the future. As it makes that strategic decision, it will be important to tease out the extent to which the decision is influenced by Rimisp's reading of what is occurring in Latin

America, by its own sense of where it situates itself in the politics of the debates on rural development, and/or by its reading of what its funding agencies want.⁷⁶

Rimisp and its partnerships

Rimisp already invests heavily in both its strong and weak ties, and it would be hard to further expand such investment, given the pressures on time and resources. However, within its portfolio of relationships, social movements and base level organizations are relatively underrepresented, particularly so when seen in comparison with Rimisp's relationships with different types of NGOs (Figure 4). This may be changing as *Municipios indígenas* and TREM opened up this front somewhat more, and *Territorios con Identidad Cultural* promises the same. Still, a case can be made for managing such a redistribution of relationships more consciously. It is at least conceivable that through relationships with these actors, the organization's reading of rural Latin America would change – or at least new angles would be opened up. At the same time, to have such networks and linkages would be an asset for Rimisp, positioning it in interesting ways for agencies wanting greater contact with such actors.

The second phase of TREM may be an important vehicle through which Rimisp could do this, covering costs involved in building such networks and linking them at the same time to research on contemporary rural change. The challenge will be for TREM-2 to resist the temptation to become a sort of vehicle for promoting concepts of DTR. Instead it can be a program in which DTR is an object of debate, deconstruction and reconstitution, and in which it is possible to explore various readings of rural transformation at the same time.

TREM-2 may also be a vehicle for broadening relationships with Latin American universities – another front which is currently relatively weak within Rimisp. There are several arguments for deepening such relationships. First, they would offer a chance for Rimisp to broaden its potential recruitment of new research assistants; second they allow another channel for introducing Rimisp-inspired ideas and products into distinct spheres of public debate; and third they constitute another, albeit more incremental, channel for policy *incidencia*, through influencing subsequent generations of professionals. Such linkages would thus be understood as part of both a human resource management and development strategy for Rimisp, as well as a strategy for influencing the public sphere.

Finally, a case can be made for some modest deepening of relationships with *socios* that have capacities in areas of research and reflection that have not typically been strong within Rimisp. The *socios* targeted would depend in part on what new areas of work Rimisp may chose to open up. Ex ante, however, it would seem appropriate to develop partnerships with actors working on

⁷⁶ Interviewees were also asked whether Rimisp ought to engage in new themes. Most said yes, though there was no clear pattern as to the themes that were identified. Those noted in the text are some that were mentioned. Others include: trade liberalization/FTAs (several times); gender (several times); rural finance (an area that Rimisp was at one point opening up); decentralization; rural business development strategies; social policies; environmental sustainability; insertion of peasant households in the "real" economy; bioenergy development; fair trade; *denominaciones de origen* and so on.

issues of gender, social construction of space and identity (to help deepen the reflection on culture and territory within DTR) and power.

Rimisp and its geographies

Rimisp is legally a Chilean organization, and for a number of observers it also Chilean in a cultural sense. In the last three years, however, it has incorporated a PI based in Quito, and another based in La Paz giving a slight twist to the geographical feel of the organization. That Quito and La Paz are the first two cities in which non-Chile based PIs were established is perhaps unsurprising, as geographically Rimisp's strongest "field" presence is in the Andean countries: "It seems just about everyone has heard of Rimisp in the Andes" comments one funder. However, another whose work is more in the southern cone expresses surprise at how many people in the world of local development seem *not* to know Rimisp.

This geography of presence and absence clearly has much to do with the overall geographies of rural development NGOs in Latin America. While an Andean orientation is quite legitimate in an organization concerned with fostering poverty reduction and rural democratization, Rimisp is of course a Latin American organization and as we have noted, this regional orientation is deemed a great asset by many commentators. Three geographical areas in which Rimisp might strengthen its presence in order to better deliver regionally were referred to in the course of this work: Central America, Brazil and Chile.

Gaining a presence in Central America has been a recurrent problem for Chorlaví and was also for TREM, though has not been so problematic for FIDAMERICA. Regoverning Markets has also had a focus on Central America, and *Municipios Indígenas* will also work in the Isthmus. Yet interviews suggest that knowledge of Rimisp or its ideas/work is far weaker in this region than in hispanic South America. Two main theories for this were voiced in interviews. First that a number of Rimisp approaches to rural development are far less relevant in the sub-region, and do not accommodate its specificities. Second, that Rimisp has neither a physical presence nor strategic partner in the sub-region.⁷⁷ The two theories are not mutually exclusive of course, and the first might be partly a derivative of the second. Either way, Rimisp's statement of objectives ought to lead it to assume a greater presence in Central America either through a resident PI or perhaps more feasibly and productively through a strategic partnership. The ideal type of partner would be an organization of similar characteristics to Rimisp: a hybrid, regional organization with a desire to strengthen its research orientation. One platform for pursuing this may be through Julio Berdegué's presence⁷⁸ on the advisory committee of an emerging learning initiative on territorial dynamics in Central America.

Brazil is also a weak spot for Rimisp, and while TREM had three Brazilian research studies, by and large the organization's presence there is not strong. Opening this front is far more complex

⁷⁷ A third theory is that Central American organizations have not been attracted by Rimisp because they already have adequate funding resources. However, this theory is not convincing, given the difficult financial situation in which a number of research oriented private actors find themselves.

⁷⁸ Along with the author – noted for reasons of transparency.

(for reasons of language and sheer size) and arguably less necessary given the enormous capacities that exist already within Brazil. A slow strengthening – as the opportunity arises – of current relationships within Brazil is likely the most sensible strategy. That said, and as noted above, this ought not to exclude Brazil as an object of analysis in Rimisp research. The effects of Brazilian investment and demand on rural transformation in hispanophone South America is a subject very worthy of research, a topic that could be considered with some of the current strong and weak ties that Rimisp enjoys in Brazil.

Chile is perhaps the most tricky of these three geographies to resolve. On the one hand, Rimisp's mission statement would not lead to a prioritization of work in Chile; on the other hand, within Chile there seems to be a sense that Rimisp is not as active or visible as it might be. While Rimisp is expanding work in Chile, this has so far been primarily of an evaluative nature. In this sense, Chile seems to be more of an income stream for Rimisp, a way of filling in the green section in Figure 2, than as a clear source of strategic learning. In this sense, the fact that *Territorios con identidad cultural* will conduct research in Chile (Chiloe) seems very sensible, as it opens up a different type of engagement with the country – a relationship not mediated by a public sector sub-contract, and one that allows slightly more analytical probing. Without burdening TREM-2 with too many tasks, opening up some of its research in Chile would be a good idea for the same reason. Looking at rural Chile through its territories rather than through policy instruments may well generate quite distinct lessons.

De-centering the Presidency in Rimisp

Both Rimisp-1 and Rimisp-2 were founded by Julio Berdegué, its current President. This implies that Rimisp has been intimately associated with him for almost two decades. And indeed, at least among the people interviewed for this study, Rimisp continues to be closely identified with Julio Berdegué, though these same interviewees have immense respect for the other PIs also. In this one sense Rimisp has *not* yet escaped a phenomenon apparent in many other NGOs – that of institutionalizing itself beyond the leadership of its founding Director, and of building an institutional identity that is independent of this leader's identity.

But does it need to do this? That depends in part on how far the situation threatens the organization's sustainability, and the quality of its contributions, and here we have the problem of the counterfactual. It does seem the case that Rimisp has systems in place and a quality of staff that would allow it to continue operating without Julio Berdegué. However, one also senses that for many donors Julio Berdegué's presence continues to serve as a sort of insurance policy guaranteeing product quality. That is, the guarantee is still bound as much to the person as to the institution. With time, this could threaten Rimisp.

Of course this situation may be time dependent. As Rimisp grows, and partners increasingly experience it in ways in which the current President is less present, such associations may begin to change. Indeed, this is another argument in favor of modest growth in the number of Rimisp PIs. There may also be a case for reducing the presence of the President in certain projects, opening up more protagonism for their PIs, and so catalyzing this change in *socios'* perceptions of Rimisp. While a reduction of Julio Berdegué's protagonism may occur by default (if other

demands on his time increase), it is probably safer not to leave this simply to such a default effect, and to begin to plan for this and to broaden the public faces of Rimisp.

Annex 1 - Persons interviewed or consulted

Personal Interviews

Nombre	Institución	Cargo	País
Julio Berdegúe	Rimisp	Presidente	Chile
Germán Escobar	Rimisp	Vice Presidente	Chile
Gilles Cliche	Rimisp	Investigador Principal	Chile
Eduardo Ramírez	Rimisp	Investigador Principal	Chile
Alejandro Schejtman	Rimisp	Investigador Principal	Chile
Claudia Ranaboldo	Rimisp	Investigador Principal	Bolivia
Manuel Chiriboga	Rimisp	Investigador Principal	Chile/Ecuador
José Bengoa	Rimisp	Investigador Asociado	Chile
Sergio Faigenbaum	Rimisp	Investigador Asociado	Chile
Rodrigo García	Rimisp	Investigador Asociado	Chile
Gema Carrasco	Rimisp	Administradora	Chile
Rubén Pino	Rimisp	Asistente Investigación	Chile
Katherine Vargas	Rimisp	Asistente Investigación	Chile
Petra Durstewitz	Rimisp	Asistente Investigación	Chile
Stefania Tolomeotti	Rimisp	Comunicadora	Chile
Julia Bade	Rimisp	Equipo administrativo	Chile
Lucia Carrasco	Rimisp	Equipo administrativo	Chile
Francisco Aguirre	Agraria	Director	Chile
Mina Namdar Irani	Agroqualitas	Co-fundadora	Chile
Octavio Sotomayor	ODEPA	Ex-Director	Chile
Martine Dirven	Cepal		Chile
Jean Paul Lacoste	Ford Foundation	Oficial de Programas	Chile
Dorcas Frigolett	Mideplan		Chile
José Miguel Urzua	Intendencia de Bío Bío		Chile
Andrea Mendoza	Intendencia de Bío Bío	Dpto. Planes y Programas	Chile
Jaime Ramírez	Agraria Sur	Director	Chile
Maarten Boers	Icco	Oficial de Programas	Holanda
Merle Faminow	IDRC	Oficial de Programas	Uruguay
Simon Carter	IDRC		Canada
Deborah Collins	NZAid	Oficial de Programas	New Zealand
Raquel Peña Montenegro	FIDA	Ex-Directora División América Latina y el Caribe	Italia
Enrique Murguía	FIDA	Country Portfolio Manager	Italia
Paolo Silveri	FIDA	Country Portfolio Manager	Italia
Carter Brandon	World Bank	Líder Sectorial	Argentina
Frank Escobar	Prodap II	Director	El Salvador

Herman Rosa	Prisma	Director	El Salvador
Ileana Gomez	Prisma	Investigadora y miembro del Consejo del Grupo Chorlavi	El Salvador
Susan Kandel	Prisma	Investigador	El Salvador
Nelson Cuellar	Prisma	Investigador	El Salvador
Raúl Moreno		Consultor	Costa Rica
Jorge Balbis	ALOP	Secretario Ejecutivo	Costa Rica
Miguel Gómez	RUTA	Director	Costa Rica
Carmen Elena Morales	RUTA-FIDA	Enlace Fida	Costa Rica
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Jorge Ardila	IICA	Director, Área de Tecnología e Innovación, nuevo Director Área de Políticas e Instituciones	Costa Rica
Clara Craviotti	CONICET	Investigadora	Argentina
Roberto Martínez Nogueira	Grupo CEO	Director	Argentina
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Miembros de equipo	CONICET-CIEL	Investigadores	Argentina
José Catalano	Ex INTA	Consultor	Argentina
Hugo Cohan	ExBID	Consultor	Argentina
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Fernando Eguren	CEPES/ALOP	Presidente Cepes, Coordinador Grupo de Trabajo sobre Desarrollo Rural, ALOP	Perú
Javier Escobal	Grade	Director de Investigación	Perú
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Josefa Rojas	Oxfam Internacional/Intermon	Group leader	Perú
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Rubén Medina	Gobierno del Estado de Michoacán, Director de Comercialización Agropecuaria	Mexico
Nicolás Mateo	Secretario Ejecutivo FONTAGRO	EEUU
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Annex 3 – Terms of Reference

Antecedentes

Rimisp desea contratar la realización de una evaluación externa que le aporte insumos para la preparación de un plan estratégico 2006-2011.

Como ha sucedido en otros momentos en la historia de Rimisp, queremos reflexionar críticamente sobre nuestra contribución específica a la comunidad latinoamericana interesada en los asuntos del desarrollo rural, en términos de objetivos, contenidos y formas de trabajo y de organización. Queremos reflexionar críticamente sobre lo que hacemos y lo que aportamos dentro del contexto institucional del que formamos parte.

Con base en ello, pensaremos y tomaremos decisiones sobre las líneas de continuidad y de cambio de cara a los próximos cinco años.

Objetivo

El objetivo de la evaluación externa de Rimisp es generar evidencias y recomendaciones que ayuden a mejorar la relevancia, la efectividad, la eficiencia, los efectos (outcomes) y la sostenibilidad de Rimisp como organización, y la calidad de sus procesos y productos.

Contenidos

La evaluación está referida principalmente al período entre el 1 de enero 2000 al 31 de diciembre 2005, pero incluirá referencias a los 14 años anteriores en la medida en que sea necesario para el adecuado tratamiento de temas particulares.

La evaluación cubrirá dos aspectos:

1. Una reseña crítica de lo que Rimisp es, cómo trabaja, cómo está organizado, cómo interactúa con su entorno, cómo se gobierna y gestiona, y lo que ha hecho en los últimos años.

2. En su parte más sustantiva, dará respuesta a las siguientes siete preguntas:

(a) ¿Para quién es relevante el trabajo de Rimisp? ¿Qué cambios deberían impulsarse a este respecto?

(b) ¿Qué tan efectivo es Rimisp en relación con sus objetivos institucionales y los objetivos de sus proyectos? ¿Qué medidas se pueden tomar para mejorar la efectividad de Rimisp en los próximos años?

(c) ¿La calidad de los procesos y productos de Rimisp es aceptable de acuerdo con estándares internacionales aplicables a organizaciones semejantes? ¿Qué medidas se pueden tomar para mejorar la calidad de los procesos y productos de Rimisp en los próximos años?

(d) ¿Qué tan eficiente es Rimisp, es decir, que capacidad tiene de organizar y gestionar recursos y relaciones para el logro de los objetivos institucionales y de sus proyectos? ¿Qué medidas se pueden tomar para mejorar la eficiencia de Rimisp en los próximos años?

(e) ¿Cuáles son los principales efectos (*outcomes*) del trabajo de Rimisp? ¿Qué se puede hacer para mejorar la eficacia de Rimisp?

(f) Dadas las tendencias en su contexto político, institucional, intelectual y financiero, ¿Es Rimisp una organización sustentable? ¿Qué medidas puede adoptar Rimisp para mejorar o consolidar condiciones que contribuyan a sus sustentabilidad?

(g) En síntesis, ¿Cuál es el nicho y el aporte específico o el valor agregado de Rimisp en el contexto de las organizaciones públicas y privadas, nacionales e internacionales, que en América Latina se dedican a temas de desarrollo rural? ¿Cuáles son los cambios que debe realizar Rimisp para asegurar que en los próximos años pueda hacer una contribución significativa y aportar valor a los procesos de promoción de la inclusión, la equidad, el bienestar y el desarrollo democrático en las sociedades rurales latinoamericanas?

Metodología

Corresponderá al consultor definir la metodología más adecuada para tratar los contenidos de la evaluación, sin otra restricción que la presupuestaria. Rimisp tendrá la oportunidad de opinar sobre la metodología que proponga el consultor.

El consultor tendrá acceso completo e ilimitado a los archivos de Rimisp, incluyendo toda la información contable y financiera si así lo requiere. En su informe, en la sección de metodología, el consultor deberá certificar si ha tenido alguna restricción en el acceso a la información requerida por él durante la evaluación.

Rimisp facilitará al consultor la información sobre las contrapartes de Rimisp en sus diferentes proyectos, de tal forma que el consultor pueda tomar contacto con dichas contrapartes. Si fuera necesario, Rimisp solicitará a las contrapartes que le proporcionen al consultor toda la información que éste requiera sobre Rimisp.

Rimisp esperaría que el Consultor interactúe y dialogue con una muestra diversa de actores de las sociedades rurales: productores, dirigentes sociales, autoridades de gobierno, intelectuales y académicos, y ONG y agencias de desarrollo, incluyendo donantes. Rimisp además vería favorablemente que el Consultor interactúe con organizaciones y personas que tengan una visión crítica de Rimisp y su trabajo.

El consultor contará con el apoyo de un Ayudante de Investigación de Rimisp para obtener y ordenar la información y documentación requerida.